

# THE DEVIL'S HENCHMEN

JOHN OLDREY



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BY  
**JOHN OLDREY**



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To  
MY FRIEND  
H. E. D.

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## CHAPTER I

BY AIR TO THE EAST

“**M**Y lords, ladies and gentlemen, this is a great occasion. . . .” The speaker’s sentiment was banal, his words hackneyed, but an audience which has dined well is usually more enthusiastic than discriminating, and the rest of the sentence was engulfed in a tidal wave of cheering.

It was a curious scene, full of sharp contrasts and utter incongruities. Overhead and all around, save where their gaunt bareness was clothed with the crude motley of bunting and streamers which we are pleased to term “decorations,” could be seen the joists and girders, ties and struts, of a great airship hangar, whilst below, on tables stretching from end to end of it, gleamed the white napery and glittering furnishings of a public banquet. Underfoot were rough boards, their plebeian surface partially hidden beneath the usual red drugget, on which stood the cheering throng of feasters.

The speaker, Sir James Harris, Bart., Managing Director and practical owner of the European and Oriental Air Line, certainly did not betray his origin in his appearance. A plumber’s son, he was self-made—Harris’ “Tweed” motor-bicycles having brought him a fortune,—but the mental picture associated with the terms “new-rich” and “profiteer” did not fit him in the least. He was tall and thin, with a shock of snow-white hair and a decidedly Roman nose (which might have been aristocratic, but was probably Semitic), and his pomposity of manner added to the illusion rather than otherwise. Only those who knew him in private life ever really penetrated beneath

the surface, and a ribald valet had once been dismissed for commenting, in the great man's hearing, on the generally recognised impossibility of using sows' ears as raw material in a silk purse factory. To do him justice, however, he treated his employees well enough on the whole ; Captain the Hon. Anthony Netherley, D.S.O., M.C., Chief Pilot of the European and Oriental Air Line, who detested him, was always ready to concede this, but usually qualified it by hinting that the attitude was purely a matter of policy—an integral part of the fellow's pose, in fact.

Just now, the said Captain Netherley was standing beside the great man's daughter, Rosalind, near the place of honour, apparently adding his quota to the cheering, but in reality bored stiff. Of medium height, stockily built and plain in the extreme, he formed in every respect save one a striking contrast to the girl, who was tall and graceful, with a fascinating charm of feature which made one wonder how she came to be the daughter of Sir James Harris ; only in colouring did she resemble the Hon. Anthony, both having fair, wavy hair, from which ever and anon the garish glare of the powerful arcs overhead awoke a fleeting gleam of evanescent gold.

Quiet having been restored, Sir James playfully ventured to hope that every one of his sentences would not evoke the same measure of applause, since in that case the "great occasion" would develop into a serial story.

" . . . But you are right to be enthusiastic," he went on ; " the event which brings us together is the consummation of a work which lies very near to the hearts of all of us,—I mean the knitting together of this great Empire of ours by the impalpable, but nevertheless real and unbreakable strands of aerial travel." (Cheers.) " As you know, successive Governments have been muddling along for years . . ." (Hear ! Hear !) " . . . and their airships still do not fly beyond Egypt, which can now be reached regularly and much more speedily by aeroplane. You are doubtless aware, too, of the untold miles of red tape I had to unwind before our authorities could be induced to entrust the whole thing to private enterprise and consent

to the formation of the European and Oriental Air Line. That was only six months ago, and now, my lords, ladies and gentlemen,—in spite of the almost insuperable difficulties which have had to be surmounted, the interminable strikes and what not,—you are already met to bid God-speed to our new air-liner, the ‘*Britain*,’ which will leave this aerodrome to-morrow morning at the dreadful hour of seven o’clock.” (Cheers and laughter.)

“ As you may know, we have no intention of mollycoddling her ; there will be none of the ‘ca-canny’ in which many of the workmen employed on her construction have indulged. She is going to do the very first time what she will henceforth have to do twenty-five or thirty times a year,—fly right to New Zealand, via Egypt, India and Australia . . .” (loud and prolonged cheers) “ and back.” (More cheers.) “ The voyage will take nearly nine days each way, her actual flying time being rather more than seven-and-a-half, whilst her full complement of passengers, forty-eight, will be carried. I shall be one of them . . .” (great cheers) “ . . . and my family will accompany me.” (Cheers.) “ The ‘*Britain*’ will be piloted by Captain Netherley, who is already known to most of you . . .” (tremendous enthusiasm) “ . . . and who is, at the moment, trying to hide behind my daughter.” (Laughter and cheers.)

“ Well, friends,” continued Sir James, “ so far I have been talking about what you already know, and, perhaps, boring you.” (“No! No!”) “ Now I have a piece of really interesting news, which, with my daughter’s permission . . .” (frantic signs from Rosalind) “ . . . oh, without it, I perceive . . .” (laughter) “ . . . I will confide to you. Captain Netherley is taking the ‘*Britain*’ on her maiden trip, but although our airship will presumably remain single . . .” (laughter) “ . . . he will come back married.” (Cheers.) “ I am to have the romantic and unique pleasure of confiding to him my only daughter, somewhere in the air between Basra and Karachi.” (Cheers.) “ To-morrow is the twenty-seventh of July, so the wedding will take place on the twenty-ninth, that

being my lucky day,—I don't know about Captain Netherley's . . ." (laughter) ". . . but I trust it will be his, too." (Cheers.) "Well, friends, I must say good-night now, and I leave you in the hope that as many of you as dare risk the inclement atmosphere of seven a.m. . . ." (laughter) ". . . will be present to bid us God-speed."

The speaker sat down amidst tumultuous applause, which finally splintered and broke into the strains of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow."

. . . . .

"Y'know, I don't hand any palm to these things," said the Yankee; ". . . sort o' much ado about nothing. 'Sides, a thimble-full o' wind, and they're through." He jerked his thumb towards the towering bulk of A.S. "Britain," straining at her moorings, and spat contemptuously.

Bob Maconochie, Wireless Superintendent of the E.O.A.L., who was to form one of her complement for this occasion only, had his own doubts on the subject, but he was not the man to take a remark of that kind lying down. "Weel," he retorted, "ye dinna need to travel on her if ye funk it."

"Nix on funk, Scottie. Y'kin *ex-tract* that notion from y'r pudd'n'-basin right now. But all th' same, if we git th're an' back agin without spillin' some beans, my name ain't Harry Grew. Th're's too much gas an' too li'l ballast to that th're liver-sausage, I'm tellin' ye. 'Sides, she's what you Britishers call 'jerry-built.'"

"Now you're talking through your hat," commented Captain Netherley, curtly.

"Maybe," conceded Mr. Grew, "but I got a kind o' hunch that any sort o' machine that's been tied together by Gawd knows how many different lots o' workmen is nat'rally bound to be jerry-built."

"Not necessarily," retorted the skipper, somewhat grimly; "I've seen to that. Anyhow, there was nothing else for it; we've had strike after strike, and it wasn't

until Sir James took the plunge and refused to have a Union man on the premises that we got any forrader at all."

Mr. Grew spat again. "Darn pity some more o' y'r big noises in this li'l ol' country don't do ditto," he said. "One o' these days, England 'll go to almighty smash, an' then the Union bosses 'll be on th' dole themselves,—only there won't be any dole, not so's you'd notice. Fact o' the matter is, th' hull o' Yurrup's got the itch, an' got it bad. Look at th' noo fuss'in th' Balkans, to say nothin' o' th' way you've sat on y'r haunches an' let Germany an' Russia enter th' bonds o' holy matri-mon-y together. Cast y'r optic over th' muck-up you've made in Turkey an' Egypt!—Nice sort o' tea-party we'd have if we landed 'long th're anywhere, wouldn't we?—all merry an' bright!"

"Fairrst I've hairrd o' Turrkey an' Egypt bein' in Europe," interjected Bob Maconochie.

"Aw, same thing. You guys in Yurrup made the muck-up, anyway. Fancy givin' that gang o' darn dagoes in Egypt democratic institootions! You mus' be plumb crazy! An' then there's India; li'l ol' England is s'posed to tootle th' toon th're, but th' airship's as like as not to land slick in th' middle of a bun-fight b'tween two flocks o' niggers, with th' vic-e-roy holdin' th' buns. Suff'rin' bootleggers! We useter think you Britishers had some gum'tion when it came to teachin' niggers th' alphabet, but b'gum . . ."

"Talking of bootleggers," began the skipper, sweetly,—

"Wal, s'long," put in the Yankee, hurriedly; "I'd better git my ol' mangle aboard, 'cos here come all th' big noises an' th' li'l tin whistles."

"Who the devil's that uncouth guy?" asked Anthony Netherley, with a grin at the effect of his remark, as Mr. Harry Grew sauntered off, humming.

"Cinematograph wallah," replied Bob; "the old man's takin' darned good care that the fact o' his august prresence on boarrd shall be handed down to posteerity. I dinna understan', mysel', why he fixed the kick-off for

such an un-Chreestian hoor as seven i' the mornin'. Half London'd ha' been here if he'd made it midday."

The skipper laughed shortly. "I had something to do with that; the old fool wanted to start after lunch, but that would have meant landing at Marseilles in the middle of the night, and I flatly refused to do any such thing."

A heterogeneous procession had meanwhile been straggling across the aerodrome, and Sir James, strutting at its head like a drum-major, came up just in time to miss hearing the speaker's unflattering remarks.

"All ready, Captain Netherley?"

"Yes, sir, but these people will have to get aboard pretty quickly if we're to move off at seven."

"Ah, to be sure! We must be punctual—what?" And with that the great man began fussing round and getting in everybody's way until his long-suffering skipper, in desperation, suggested that he ought to be in the Control Room for the take-off. This gentle fillip to Sir James' vanity served its turn, and he followed the other's lead with surprising docility.

Bob Maconochie, lounging at the foot of the gangway, could not help thinking that there was a great deal in what the Yankee had said. Unwieldy the airship certainly was, and there did seem the dickens of a lot of her for a small carrying capacity.

Overhead towered the great envelope in its rigid frame, 850 feet long and 115 in diameter, filled with six million cubic feet of Helium, whilst strung along beneath it—lilliputian in comparison—were the four cars, connected by a narrow covered-in gangway.

Of these, the foremost, 130 feet by 18, possessed a blunt nose, in which was situated the Control Room, the remainder of its length being given over to passengers. A corridor three feet wide led down the centre for 100 feet, at which point it took a sharp turn and followed the left-hand side to the rear of the car, where it returned to the middle and gave on to a gangway connecting up with the second car. The passenger accommodation consisted (from front to rear) of twelve four-berth cabins, flanking the corridor;

behind these, on the left, were a reading and writing room, four bathrooms and four lavatories, whilst on the right were situated a ladies' room, music room and smoking room, the rear of the car being taken up by dining saloon and kitchen.

The second, third, and fourth cars were for cargo and stores, crew's quarters, and engines, respectively, the latter consisting of ten 450 h.p. motors, of which only five were intended to be in use at any one time. The "Britain's" total lift was 150 tons, including twenty tons of cargo, forty-eight passengers, their baggage and the mails, crew, petrol for 7,500 miles, stores, etc. Capable of a maximum speed of eighty-five miles per hour, she would normally run at seventy, and her time-table had been calculated on the latter basis.

Apart from her size and comfort, however, there was one important respect in which the "Britain" was immeasurably superior to her predecessors,—she did not need fine weather and an army corps of workmen to effect a safe descent. For this purpose, the helicopter principle had been applied in the form of a number of vertical screws just above the envelope, working on enclosed shafts running up through it between the metal sections containing the ballonets. These could be operated at need by any of the ordinary driving motors, those not so in use being kept coupled to the propellers, in order to maintain sufficient way on the airship to keep her head to the wind.

Would they "spill any beans"? The Yankee's expressive phrase kept recurring to Bob Maconochie at intervals, and he could not entirely get rid of an uneasy feeling that the remark was prophetic. Well, it might be a way of escape for the skipper, whose joy-days were numbered, anyway, and he himself didn't much care whether the devil took him that way or another. At least, those were his sentiments until the moment when, having taken a final look round, he turned to go aboard behind the last passenger, a lady, and tripped headlong over a rope. Mlle. Yvonne de St. Launeuc escaped the falling Scot by inches and laughed gaily as she helped him to his

feet, thinking bad words, but uttering only incoherent apologies.

"Monsieur had better not do that when we are up in the sky," she murmured; "it might upset our equilibrium."

"Monsieur's" face rapidly traversed the colours of the spectrum from red to violet as he blundered up the gangway in the wake of this disconcertingly self-possessed young person, so obviously and charmingly French, but who spoke English better than he did. A middle-aged gentleman, apparently her father, awaited her at the top, and the two courteously stood aside to let Bob pass, another bewitching display of dimples completing his embarrassment.

## CHAPTER II

### DR. RADOCEK

“ **W**HOS the lady ? ” For a solid hour, the Wireless Superintendent had been burning to ask this question of his friend, Captain Netherley, but Sir James insisted on staying in the Control Room until the English Coast had been left behind, and Bob Maconochie’s thirst for information perforce remained unsatisfied.

“ M’m. I *thought* there was something wrong with you,” said the skipper, looking at him curiously ; “ who’s which lady ? There’s a round dozen aboard.”

“ Th’ one wi’ th’ smile.”

Anthony Netherley laughed. “ I expect they’ve mostly got smiles—of sorts ; but . . .”

“ Ah, Tony, laddie, but this one . . .” Bob stopped short ; to do justice to that smile was beyond him.

“ Got it bad,” commented the other ; “ has she no—er—birthmarks ? ”

“ She’s French, mon, an’ I nearly knocked her doon.—Carry on ! Laugh, ye chucklehead ! Laugh ! ”

“ Well,” said the skipper, recovering himself, “ you are a trifle inconsequential, now aren’t you ? ”

Bob grunted.

“ However, I’ll put you out of your misery. The only Froggies on the passenger list are the French Air Attaché, Monsieur de St. Launeuc, and his daughter, who is evidently the lady you’ve been ill-using—you clumsy galoot.”

“ Weel, a puir wee lassie wha’s been knocked aboot winna forget the dairrty dog,” retorted Bob ; “ ‘tis a guid introduction, forby.—An’ that brings anither matter ta’ my mind. Ye didna tell me ye were gettin’ married yersel’ ; th’ fairrst I hairrd o’ t was when Sairr James put th’ advairrtisement in his speech last night. Tony, laddie,

either ye're a more secretive beggar than I thocht, or else 'tis a wee bit sudden."

Tony's brow clouded and his manner changed abruptly. "I know it's sudden, confound you!" he snapped; "but you don't suppose I *want* to get married, do you?"

The Scot looked bewildered. "Er—well—er—'tis usual, d'ye ken," he stuttered; "hoots, mon, ye dinna generally get married unless ye want to."

"No, one doesn't," retorted his friend, "but I'm the unlucky exception which whatever gods decide these things are using to prove their blessed rule. In fact, Stewpan, old man . . ." (Bob Maconochie was inevitably known to his intimates as 'Stewpan') ". . . I'm for it! I'm right in the consommé, and it's too hot to swim to the side. You can't get me out, but you *can* help a bit by being chief mourner on Sunday, if you will."

"B-but what the hades—" began the other.

"Tell you all about it in a minute, if you'll exercise a little self-restraint," returned Tony, irritably; "question is, will you be best man?"

"Delighted, I'm sure!" was the mumbled answer.

"Yes, you *would* be delighted," snapped the prospective bridegroom; "you ain't the victim."

"Grratitude," growled Bob, turning up his eyes, "thy name is *not* the Hon. Anthony Netherley, D.S.O., M.C. . . ."

"Try not to be a bigger ass than nature intended; if you'd been condemned to penal servitude for life, *you* wouldn't be wandering round whistling comic songs, either."

"Weel, I canna see what ye're grrumblin at," commented Bob. "Th' fair Rosalind's family tree ain't prrecisely a gnarled an' ancient oak, I admeet, but she's a bonnie lassie, an' as for bawbees . . .! Holy St. Andrew! Mon, ye dinna ken when ye're well off!"

"I *didn't*," retorted Tony, significantly changing the tense. "Dash it, Stewpan, I don't want to get married at all, let alone to Rosalind Harris. Oh, she's not bad, I grant you, especially considering the paternal handicap, but—well, she isn't *quite*, you know . . ." Bob nodded.

" Not that I should care if she were a scullery maid, so long as I wanted her, but I don't want her ; that's the trouble."

" Then wud ye mind tellin' me," interrupted the other, " what i' th' name o' th' de'il ye're after ? Ye ha' na' been compromisin' th' lassie, ha' ye ? "

" That's about what it amounts to," was the reply ; " at least, the old man chooses to think so, or says he does. However, I'll begin at the beginning, and you shall judge for yourself."

The unlucky skipper then went on to tell how he had been ensnared by as mean a scheme as could be imagined, although, unfortunately, actual proof of anything underhand was lacking.

He had been invited down to Sir James' place near Matlock for a fortnight's recuperation, and, towards the end of his stay, had motored over to Sheffield in company with the Baronet, the latter's son Archibald, and Rosalind. A trumped-up excuse sufficed to detain the two former in town overnight, leaving Tony to drive the girl back home. Unfamiliar with the surrounding country, he was easily deceived when Archibald Harris gave him wrong directions, and these, together with a suspiciously leaky petrol tank and the incontrovertible emptiness of three spare tins, had resulted in his staying two nights at a lonely inn with Rosalind. A general strike of railway and postal servants then in progress cut the travellers off from the outside world as effectively as if they had been in another planet, and it was only the belated arrival by road of a supply of petrol, ordered days before by the innkeeper, which enabled their car to resume its journey at all.

Sir James did not threaten, but he nevertheless made it abundantly clear that he expected Tony to " do the right thing," counting, doubtless, on his victim's sense of *noblesse oblige*, and he was not disappointed. The unlucky skipper was hopelessly handicapped from the start, for not only was he convinced of the girl's own innocence—she would have killed herself sooner than marry him, had she known—but the precarious state of health of his father, the old Earl of Bransmere, absolutely precluded any

thought of braving the scandal which Sir James would have been certain to create.

Bob pondered deeply for a while when his chief had finished, and then shook his head slowly. "There's na gettin' oot o' it," he commented, "but 'tis a dairry business altogether."

Tony shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "Oh well," he said, "I suppose it might be much worse. Rosalind might be a 'weather-beaten old hag,' as somebody says somewhere; in fact, she *would* be if old Harris—"

He broke off at a hasty whisper of "Cave!" from Bob; only just in time, for the door opened, and the subject of his unfinished remark strutted in, with Yvonne de St. Launeuc and her father. The Scot's face promptly forestalled the glories of the sunset they anticipated witnessing over the Mediterranean later on, and he barely heard the introductions that followed. A shy man with the opposite sex at the best of times, he had indeed "got it bad," as Tony had said, and he wandered nervously to one of the many windows of the Control Room, where he stood gazing intently at the cloudless sky.

A delightful voice, matching the smile, brought him round with a start. "Monsieur Maconochie . . ." her pronunciation of the name was positively fascinating, "I should just love to see the Wireless Room; would you, I wonder . . ."

"D-d-delighted, m-ma'm'selle!" stuttered Bob, and escorted her to the door with almost indecent haste, whilst M. de St. Launeuc became absorbed in an automatic chart, slowly unrolling in front of the helmsman.

Sir James glared after them. "What's the matter with Maconochie?" he muttered, in an aside to the skipper; "is he drunk?"

"Certainly not, sir," was the reply, delivered with what Tony earnestly hoped was a straight face; "he's—he feels overwhelmed with the—er—honour."

"Hum! Ha!" grunted the great man, sceptically; "better keep an eye on him."

The dining saloon of the "Britain" was a magnificent apartment, nineteen feet by fifteen, with an alcove five feet by eight. Its decorations were in blue and silver, the brocade upholstering and thick carpet being a darker shade of the same colour, whilst the outer wall possessed windows throughout its length, thus counteracting any tendency towards "heaviness." Round the walls were ranged eleven tables, each accommodating four persons, and a larger one, seating eight, stood in the centre. At one end of the saloon was a way through to the kitchen, whilst in the alcove were two more doors, leading to the corridor and smoking-room respectively.

Most of the passengers were already seated when Captain Netherley and Sir James entered and took their places at either end of the centre table, in full view of what was surely the strangest mixture of "personages" and humble folk ever assembled three thousand feet above Mother Earth. On either side of the Baronet were Lady Harris and Archibald, Rosalind being seated by her fiancé. The French Air Attaché and Mlle. de St. Launeuc were also at the centre table, the eighth member of the party being Captain The Rev. Tobias Lawson, an Indian Army Chaplain of the "afternoon-tea" type. Amongst the occupants of the side tables were numbered a certain Dr. Radocek and his wife, the former being the Czech managing director of a big Czecho-German Air Service. Lieut.-Colonel Robert Matthieson, of the Indian Viceroy's staff, his wife and son, sat in the alcove, together with the Hon. Alan Merton, nephew of the Foreign Secretary, their table being one of the very few whose occupants were purely British.

Anthony Netherley had long been looking forward to this day, when he should preside over the first meal on the inaugural trip of the European and Oriental Air Line's service, but for him every atom of pleasure was banished from the occasion by the ever-present thought of next Sunday's ceremony. He took little or no part in the conversation, and his mind was busy with comparisons between his two neighbours, Yvonne de St. Launeuc and

Rosalind Harris ; their names exactly represented their real selves, he thought, and although the French girl's beauty did not exercise the same devastating effect on him as it had on " poor old Stewpan," he found himself a prey to bitter regret that it was not she, rather than Rosalind, to whom the rest of his life must be devoted. But there,—M. de St. Launeuc could never have been guilty of the disreputable manœuvres of the plumber-Baronet.

Yvonne had heard of the forthcoming aerial wedding,—who, indeed, had not?—and, woman-like, she was not long in forming her own opinion of the affair. She dismissed the newspaper talk of romance with a mental toss of the head, and yet—why?—why? The obvious conclusion did not accord with her impression of Captain Netherley,—which goes to show that intelligence is not necessarily confined to the plain and dowdy. Concerning one thing she *had* made up her mind : she did not envy Tony his prospective brother-in-law. That gentleman had already succumbed to her charms and had lost no time in advertising the fact, after the manner of his kind. Happening to visit the Wireless Room whilst Bob was explaining its mysteries—his embarrassment completely subdued by the familiar surroundings,—the egregious Archibald had promptly elbowed him away, adding insult to injury by intimating that showing visitors round was not part of a Wireless " Operator's " duties, whatever his rank. Yvonne had said nothing,—how could she?—but this incident quickened her interest in the little Scot far more than anything else could have done, a result which Archibald Harris neither intended nor realised.

At the moment, he was busily engaged in explaining—to his own satisfaction, but to no one else's—why he had not served in the great war. The oration, with its recurrent boast of " indispensability," was mainly directed at M. de St. Launeuc, who was not listening. The Frenchman's eyes were fixed on Dr. Radocek, sitting at a table directly in front, and the Frenchman's brain was exclusively occupied in trying to decide where he had seen the man before. Yvonne, chancing to look round, followed the

direction of her father's stare, and she, too, began to wonder ; whoever this individual was, and wherever they had met him, the sense of familiarity awakened by his features was certainly associated with something unpleasant. A discreet enquiry, addressed to Tony, elicited the man's name, which conveyed nothing, being utterly unknown to her, whilst M. de St. Launeuc also drew blank when he questioned Sir James. The latter rolled forth a string of vague particulars, which were about as accurately informative as a newspaper obituary notice, and it was evident that he really knew nothing of Dr. Radocek.

Archibald, finding himself ignored by everyone else, was forced to be content with the small-talk of the reverend gentleman sitting next him, though it may be doubted whether he found it entertaining. Young Harris, insufferable as he was in most respects, was certainly no fool, and the Reverend Tobias Lawson's vapid conversation was altogether too much of a good thing. Had one been allowed to laugh, things wouldn't have been so bad, but it really was the "howling limit" (as Archibald afterwards phrased it) to be compelled to listen politely to a parson, who advocated prohibition because he had once seen a misguided mother give her child a drop of beer, and who wanted to abolish smoking because a baby was so likely to pick up its father's pipe and smoke it ! These sacrifices were a duty we owed to the young, he thought, and he was forever impressing the fact upon his "boys,"—"boys" being the epithet he invariably applied to the men of the unlucky regiment which owned him.

Tony caught snatches of the Chaplain's monologue, in the intervals of making himself as agreeable to Yvonne as was permissible, and he could not help feeling that "the hour bringeth forth the man." A depressing man for a depressing job next Sunday, but Heaven send that at least his views never prevailed, or the whole world would be as depressing as he. Tony wondered what the Rev. Tobias would say, could he know all the truth ; probably, "Ah yes, my dear friend, you have been the—ah

—victim of a most—ah—impropah proceeding on the part of Sir James ; but, my deah friend, we all have our—ah—burdens, and—ah . . .” (rapidly) “ . . . well, in the circumstances, you must marry the girl, now mustn’t you ?—yes ?”

“ Monsieur le capitaine, I have already spoken to you twice !”

Tony’s musings came to an abrupt end, and the wry smile vanished, which had twisted his lips at the fatuity and utter inevitability of every word his fancy had put into the Chaplain’s mouth. “ A thousand pardons, Mademoiselle ! I’m afraid my thoughts were . . .”

“ . . . Wandering,” finished Yvonne for him, maliciously, “ how truly gallant, Monsieur le Capitaine ! ” Her smile took the sting out of the words, and her dimples deepened as Tony gave up his attempt to be orthodox and relapsed into, “ I say, I’m awfully sorry, you know,—er—you were asking . . . ? ”

“ Whether you knew Dr. Radocek’s nationality. I cannot help thinking I have met him before, but where . . . ” The French girl shrugged her shoulders.

“ I’m told he’s a Czech,” replied Tony, “ but he looks more like a Hun to me. His wife is supposed to be a Pole ; maiden name something with ‘ sky ’ on it, I believe.”

Yvonne wrinkled her forehead, and then shrugged again helplessly.

“ I believe he knows you’re discussing him,” put in Rosalind ; “ he’s looking very hard this way.”

Incautiously Yvonne glanced across the saloon and met the Czech’s eyes. She started in spite of herself and went very white. “ *Mon Dieu ! Je m’en souviens !* ” she whispered.

Rosalind was watching her curiously. “ You’ve placed him, then ? Is he so very dreadful ? ”

“ *Mon Dieu ! Yes !* ”—the French girl shuddered. “ But I cannot speak of it now—perhaps, some time . . . ”

“ Mademoiselle, please don’t distress yourself,” interrupted Tony ; “ if the subject is painful, we’ll drop it. Let’s discuss—er—prohibition.”

Yvonne smiled at his bluntness—a ghost of her former smile. "Never mind," she said, "I'm all right now; but the sudden recollection was a fearful shock."

Conversation turned on general matters then, and it was not until long afterwards that Tony learned the reason for that stark terror in the French girl's eyes.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF A.S. " BRITAIN "

MARSEILLES was reached at four o'clock in the afternoon, nineteen minutes ahead of time, so that Sir James Harris was able to revel in the limelight for just so much longer than he had anticipated, an opportunity of which he made the most.

Viewed from the Control Room, the landscape made a magnificent picture as they hovered over the town at a thousand feet, before descending gently to the aerodrome. Below them lay the streets of Marseilles—picturesque and clean-seeming from this height—and on their right the fertile plain, across which, like so many silver threads, meandered the mouths of the Rhône, gathered here and there into a knot of silver where one of the numerous shallow lakes gleamed in the sunlight. Fifty miles away to the north-west, the spires of old Avignon were clearly discernible in the sparkling atmosphere, the heights of the Cévennes forming a dim background, whilst behind the airship to the north-east rose, tier upon tier, the massive bulk of the Alps in all their overwhelming magnificence. But the supreme glory of this glimpse of paradise, pervading all—the impression which memory would hold till the end, however dim the fertile delta, the old walls and the eternal hills might become—was the royal blue expanse of the Mediterranean, which stretched away before them in a vast, rolling plain, fading gently into the uncertain blur which was the African shore, four hundred miles to the south. Then, as the "Britain" sank slowly to earth, the miserable works of man obtruded themselves ever more insistently—dirty, narrow streets, dismal wharves, hideous chimneys, and over all a haze of smoke and coal dust—until the masterpiece of nature was completely obliterated by that drab daub which men call civilisation.

An hour later, the airship was rising again, the clean upper atmosphere once more refining the daub out of visible existence,—and then away to the south-east, skimming over the glorious Côte d'Azur and sinister Toulon, their last clear glimpse of France being the picturesque walled town of Hyères, dating from the early Christian era, which peeped out at them from its hilly arbour of palm-trees, partly defiled now by the garish hotels and aggressive paraphernalia of a purse-proud generation.

. . . . .

Dinner was over and the sun was setting, bathing with ruddy light the wild bluffs of Sardinia beneath them, when Sir James again invaded the Control Room. This time he was accompanied by Dr. Radocek, who facetiously expressed his desire to "see the wheels go round." An unobtrusive, but close scrutiny of the man strengthened Tony's first instinctive dislike; tall and angular, with coal-black beard and moustache, and a brush of hair of the same funereal hue, Dr. Radocek's appearance would have been arresting enough in any case, but his eyes were positively repulsive, being almost those of an Albino, and altogether Tony felt more than ever convinced that the man was a German. Possibly the remembrance of Yvonne's terror rendered it difficult impartially to judge, but nevertheless, wisdom dictated caution in dealing with a Hun who was facetious; the thing was unnatural—it simply didn't fit. And those eyes——!

Moreover, Dr. Radocek had not been very many minutes in the Control Room before the "Britain's" commander became convinced that this visitor knew as much about the "wheels" as he did, if not more; those eyes were everywhere, it is true, but the brain behind them was not engaged in grasping something new; it was memorising.

Bob Maconochie was present, and even he, most unobservant of mortals, felt that all was not as it should be. He made some remark as soon as the visitors had departed, after rendering the atmosphere

of the Control Róom singularly uncomfortable for a full half-hour.

"H'm. So *you've* noticed it, too, Stewpan," commented Tony; "Holy Moses! There *must* be something wrong!"

"Hoots, mon, d'ye think I'm a fule?" retorted the Scot.

"Of course," responded his friend; "otherwise you would not be here now; you'd have rescued Mademoiselle from the clutches of the gentle Archibald after dinner. Hang it, man! She did everything but ask you to!"

Bob had the grace to blush. "'Tisna' pairrt o' ma duties ta succour lassies i' deestrress, d'ye ken."

"Humbug!" laughed Tony; "you'd better own up, you old fraud. You didn't *see* her S.O.S., now did you? Trouble is, your eyes aren't as big as your ears."

"Maybe," said Bob, evasively, "but what's th' mon's game?"

"Whose? Archibald's?"

"No, ye chucklehead! Th' Jerry's."

"Oh, so *you* think he's a Jerry," commented Tony, with added interest.

"O' coarse he is! A mon doesna' swearr i' a language that's foreign ta him when he hits his nose on th' edge o' th' door, th' noo."

"Stewpan," remarked the other, "you're a bigger humbug than I thought. You had inside information all the time, and now you have the sauce to come here and pretend to be Sherlock Holmes."

"Weel, Dr. Watson," retorted Bob, "perhaps if ye didna' waste sae muckle time haverin', ye cud answer ma question. What's his game?"

"How the hades should *I* know?" growled Tony, irritably.

Bob gave a satisfied grunt. "I thocht ye'd hae ta admeet it sooner or later," he murmured; "na doot ye'll also agree we ha' got ta find oot?"

"Sure thing," drawled Tony; "you can start by palling up with his wife, old lad."

"I'll see ye damned fairrst!" snapped the Scot; "guid nicht!"

He went out and slammed the door, leaving his superior officer grinning broadly. The grin faded quickly, however, and was replaced by a troubled frown. Dr. Radocek certainly *had* a "game," but, in heaven's name, what?

Tony's thoughts had not progressed an inch by the time the Chief Officer came to relieve him, and for an hour or more he lay awake in his bunk, vainly endeavouring to make head or tail of it, and watching the faint red glow which gleamed fitfully on the window from Vesuvius, two hundred miles away to the east. Eventually, he fell asleep, to dream of steering an airship full of dead men across a mackerel sky, in which each tiny cloud was a blazing furnace, whilst, pursuing him in a demon aeroplane, was Dr. Radocek, who had somehow grown a pair of horns like wireless antennae.

It was a sleeping airship which descended at Malta for a brief halt in the small hours, and she was half-way to the African coast before any passengers were astir. Mid-morning saw them skimming over ancient Cyrenaica,—on their right the shallow Gulf of Sidra, and beneath them the low, dreary hills of El Akhdar, whilst away to their left still stretched the Mediterranean's azure plain, a slight irregularity on the horizon showing where the rocky shores of Crete and Greece rose sheer out of the waters.

All day long they flew over the sandy desert, the air which swept through the open window being like a furnace blast, scarcely moderated even by the speed of their passage. The sun was still high when they reached Cairo at six o'clock in the evening, after passing to the north of the Pyramids,—strangely dwarfed and insignificant when viewed from this height,—and the slight coolness which rose from the Nile was like a zephyr out of paradise. Any idea of its celestial origin, however, was speedily dispelled by the variety of odours which it presently brought with it from the old town. Even Sir James, pluming himself in the august shadow of H.M. The King of Egypt, who greeted them at the aerodrome, felt glad that they were

only halting for twenty minutes, and that dinner would be served in the air.

They were already crossing the Suez Canal by the time the meal was over. Tony was standing at an open window in the gangway between the first and second cars, exchanging an occasional remark with young Jimmie Matthieson and the Hon. Alan Merton, in the intervals of gazing abstractedly at the intense blue of the Mediterranean, which they were now fast leaving behind them.

"'Pon my soul," murmured Alan, "everything seems to be blue."

"Sure," agreed Tony, "but there are blues and blues."

"And you can only see the latter, I suppose?" asked Jimmie Matthieson, drily; "what's the matter with you, anyway? Nothing wrong with the jolly old sparrow, is there?"

The skipper of the said "sparrow" shook his head, but vouchsafed no further information.

"S'sh, Jimmie, don't be ribald," reproved Alan. "Can't you see it's the solemn approach of Holy Matrimony? He's wondering how long the future Mrs. Netherley will take to discover all his sins, and which of 'em she'll rumble first."

"Ass!" commented Tony, dispassionately.

"These young lads *will* do it," sighed Jimmie, who was just nineteen, wagging his head sadly.

"Ass!" repeated Tony.

Bob Maconochie came up at that moment and joined the group. "Tony, laddie, can ye spare a moment, or are ye too busy castin' pairrls?" The Scot dodged simultaneous blows from the other two, whose fists met behind his back. They said "Damn!" in unison, and under cover of the subsequent rueful rubbing of knuckles, Bob whispered, "It's urrgent, mon."

With a murmured excuse to the others, Tony accompanied the Scot to his cabin and stood gazing at a piece of paper, which the latter thrust into his hands as soon as they were alone.

"What d'ye make o' t?" asked Bob eagerly.

Tony turned it over thoughtfully. "What is it?" he queried. "Choctaw?"

"'Tis a message fra' th' Jerry."

"To whom?"

"Th' de'il knows! He told me ta ha' 't sent oot every twa hours until we got an answer. Said he wanted ta get into touch wi' a pairrty o' Czech explorers he knaws, wha are somewhere i' th' deserrrt."

"Well, it's not German," said Tony, reflectively.

"No, an' I'll tak' ma oath 'tisna' Czech, either. 'Tis code, or I'm an Englishman."

The other chuckled, "Code, decidedly!" adding, with more seriousness, "Trouble is, we can't ask anybody to decipher the bally thing for us, and *we* might swot at it till Doomsday without being any the wiser, especially as we know precious little German and no Czech . . ."

"Ta say nothin' o' Roosian," interjected Bob, significantly.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the other, "I hadn't thought of that."

They puzzled over the matter until Tony's watch came round, but got no further, and it ended by each of them keeping a copy for study at leisure.

The "Britain" was well over the Arabian desert, making due east, when her Captain came off duty at midnight. The air was cool enough now, and a great white moon lit up the stony waste beneath them, reminding him of imaginative pictures of a dead world aeons hence, which he had seen in some book of his boyhood days. The scene filled him with inexpressible sadness, and in spite of the throbbing life of the airship all about him and the near presence of fellow human-beings, he felt strangely alone—a tiny atom of no account before the awful majesty of nature. Too tired to linger, and indeed, anxious to get away from his thoughts, he threw off his clothes with unusual carelessness, tumbled incontinently into his bunk, and was just dropping off when a discreet knock startled him into full wakefulness again.

"Are ye asleep, laddie?" came Bob's voice.

"I was," he growled, getting up to open the door.

"Sorry," grinned the Scot, cheerfully, "but I thocht I'd better come ta ye at once. We've just had a reply ta th' Jerry's message; 'tis i' th' same gibberish." He handed his Chief another slip of paper, and together they wasted a good hour of precious sleep ere abandoning the problem in disgust.

"Have you given it to him yet?" asked Tony, as Bob rose to go to his own cabin.

The Scot shook his head. "Na hurry," he said; "th' mon can wait till mornin', I'm thinkin'. But laddie, what about tellin' Alan? Perhaps he cud . . ."

"Nothing doing, old man," replied the other, decidedly; "as a matter of fact, you oughtn't to have shown it to me, either."

"Oh, ta th' de'il wi' that!" exclaimed Bob; "I dinna gie a damn when a mon's tryin' ta put one ower on us.—Weel, guid nicht, th' noo." With that, he took his departure, leaving Tony to lie awake for yet another hour, alternately scrutinising the messages and thinking in an infernal circle.

It certainly seemed impossible that they could be in any straightforward language, since the various combinations of letters were clearly unpronounceable. Tony racked his brains to remember everything he had ever read or heard about deciphering codes, but the only principle which occurred to him was that based on the frequency of certain letters of the alphabet. He used this hypothesis in several attempts, but they all failed, presumably because the original was not in English.

As for his conscience, which reproved him at intervals for prying into the private affairs of a guest, he had little difficulty in sending it to sleep by arguing that he was responsible for the airship's safety, and that the incident was, to say the least, suspicious. Sophistry, perhaps, but the British Empire was made by men who were not afraid to stake their reputations on their judgment, and the Hon. Anthony Netherley was pre-eminently such an one; he had no use for that spoon-fed officialdom which is

precipitating modern Egypt and India back into the anarchy from which our undemocratic ancestors rescued them.

Sleep, not to be denied, overcame him at last, and he was still clutching the papers when roused for his next watch at eight o'clock, whilst his electric light was engaged in a pathetic attempt to compete with the brazen glare of a tropical sun. Wearily he dragged himself out of his bunk, made a hurried toilet and went along to the Control Room, from which the waters of the Persian Gulf and the mountains beyond could already be clearly distinguished. Going immediately, as was his wont, to examine the log, he received a decided shock when he saw the date.

The twenty-ninth! His wedding day! And he'd forgotten all about it! Well, it had preyed on his mind enough for the past week, heaven knew, and he felt almost grateful to Dr. Radocek and the mysterious messages for bringing him even a few hours' forgetfulness. Drearly he wondered what Rosalind was thinking; probably wild with delight, and longing for two o'clock to come. Poor kid! It was a darned shame to deceive her; yet how else could he have acted? A wry smile flitted across his face as the preposterous idea came into his mind that he might ask Dr. Marsh, the airship's Medical Officer, to put him up a love-philtre. He found himself regretting that there weren't such things, and from that, he passed on to a problem which had always puzzled him: If they never existed, why had people believed in them in the olden days? Surely, the proof of the philtre was in the kissing, and if the jolly old dope didn't act, how did the mugs explain it away?

Bob interrupted his musings by coming in, whistling "He didn't want to do it."

"Rotten bad taste," commented Tony, when the identity of the archaic tune had dawned upon him.

"Not a bit o' t', laddie! I was merely expressing ma seempathy." The Scot glanced cautiously round and dropped his voice: "Ha' ye deesected th' puzzle?" Tony shook his head. "Weel, here's anither o' them juist come in."

There was no time to study the fresh message just then, as they were already approaching the Persian Gulf, whose waves, glittering in the sun, stretched away to the right. Beneath, the great Shatt-el-Arab, combining the waters of Tigris and Euphrates, meandered across the low-lying plain, whilst three hundred miles distant to the north-west could just be discerned the domes and minarets of Baghdad.

The airship descended slowly towards Basra, whose malodorous atmosphere was perceptible even at five hundred feet and became more and more poisonous as she dropped to earth.

Sir James was at the gangway, dancing excitedly from one foot to the other, for here was another king to greet him,—His Majesty of Iraq this time, who had made the journey from Baghdad specially. Idly Colonel Matthieson, who was standing by, wondered when the man ever would have had enough of this kind of thing. Egad! The triumphal progress of a modern peregrinatory politician was nothing to it. And then there was that ridiculous wedding in the afternoon; buffoonery, he called it, and he was surprised at Captain Netherley countenancing anything of the sort.

The bowing, the scraping, and the usual ceremonial flim-flam were over all too soon for the Baronet, however. Promptly at ten o'clock, the "Britain" rose once more to the sweeter air of the heights, skirting the head of the Gulf and making E.S.E. in a bee-line for Karachi, where she was due in the small hours of the following morning—her longest uninterrupted run west of Singapore.

Rosalind and Lady Harris did not appear at lunch, which was served an hour earlier on this day of all days, but Sir James was very much in evidence, beaming indiscriminately on personages and persons, upper ten and middle ten. In fact, Jimmie Matthieson irreverently expressed the opinion, *sotto voce*, that the "old fool" looked quite prepared to kiss the cook. The cook being a middle-aged man, however, with whiskers resembling nothing so much as a clump of wait-a-bit thorns, this remark was probably an exaggeration.

Tony had fixed his features into what he fondly believed to be a cheerful grin, and was beginning to congratulate himself on possessing hitherto unsuspected histrionic powers, when Yvonne leaned over and asked sympathetically whether he had toothache. He had the presence of mind to mutter something about "a slight twinge," feeling an unconscionable hypocrite the while, but his grin disappeared nevertheless, a fact which did not escape her sharp eyes. He ate scarcely anything, and early excused himself on the ground of having to make himself "look pretty"; but Yvonne gazed after him with a puzzled frown as she noticed the bowed shoulders, which all too clearly betrayed their owner's despair.

Bob came in whilst Tony was dressing, spruce and neat in a new uniform, his red hair more thoroughly tamed than usual; but his plain features, generally so irrepressibly merry, were serious—so much so that the bridegroom rallied him.

"Why so solemn, Stewpan? You're not the guy who's getting tied up."

"Oh — that!" exclaimed Bob, contemptuously; "hoots, mon, gettin' married's a detail."

"Oh, *is it!*"

"Ay, laddie. 'Tis Dr. Radocek wha's worryin' me. D'ye happen ta knew whaur he was when we were at Basra?"

"M'no," replied the other, reflectively, "but I certainly don't remember seeing him at the raree-show round the gangway, and he's usually in evidence on these occasions."

"Prre-cisely. Weel, I ha' reason ta believe th' mon was i' th' Control Room."

"The devil he was!" exclaimed Tony; "how d'you know that?"

"I dinna knew for sairrtain, but I met th' Yank—that fellow Grrew, ye ken—awhile ago, an' he'd seen th' Jerry up that end o' th' corridor, miles awa' fra' his own cabin."

"But that's not to say he'd been in the Control Room."

"Nay, laddie, but Grrew thocht he'd come fra' there, an' th' mon's manher was suspeecious. Besides, what for

should Grew think anythin' o' 't? He wasna' ta know aboot th' wirreless."

"That's true," admitted Tony, thoughtfully, "but what the blazes was the Jerry after? He doesn't seem to have done any harm, and frankly, I don't see what harm he *could* do without involving his own carcase."

"Weel, laddie, ye can bet he winna dae that."

Tony agreed as to the absurdity of the suggestion, and there the matter dropped, although they were to have it brought back forcibly to their minds in the very near future. Meanwhile, it was already time to make a move towards the dining saloon, where the ceremony was to take place.

The table had been removed from the alcove, which had been transformed, under the Rev. Tobias Lawson's directions, into a very fair imitation of a chancel. Also, as the airship was at present flying, the alcove occupied the east end of the saloon, a point to which the reverend gentleman attached what, to a layman, seemed undue importance.

Many of the passengers were already seated when the bridegroom and his best man entered, and the Rev. Tobias appeared from one of the doors in the alcove a few minutes later.

A sort of dull resignation settled on Tony as he sat down near the improvised chancel and gazed listlessly out at the panorama of hills over which the airship was passing. The Tengsir Range had been crossed half-an-hour before, and they were now approaching Shiraz, beyond which gleamed the fantastic shape of Lake Niris, whilst away to the left one could just distinguish the ruins of ancient Persepolis. The air was fresh and cool at the great height to which it had been necessary to rise in order to clear the mountains, and there was a slight, but invigorating tang in it,—probably from the great salt deserts of the Persian interior, rather than from the sea, which now lay hundreds of miles to the south.

Punctually at two o'clock, Rosalind appeared, leaning on her father's arm, and looking entirely charming. Tony, miserable as he was, could not help but feel that most men

would have given their hat and boots to be about to wed a girl so pretty and vivacious, and withal so wealthy. Even now, he could not really grasp the fact that in a few minutes he would no longer be free, and as in a dream he stood by her side, hearing nothing of the opening words of the service,—beautiful, in spite of the Rev. Lawson's jew's-harp intonation.

Slowly, inexorably, the ceremony progressed, and already the minister was nearing those fatal words which meant the end of all things for the unlucky bridegroom, when suddenly a slight shudder ran through the airship, unnoticed by any save Tony and his best man. The two looked at one another, anxious bewilderment on their faces ; then Bob walked deliberately over to the nearest window. A movement of surprise rustled through the room, whilst the Rev. Tobias broke off in the middle of a sentence and gazed at the offender, speechless with indignation. It needed a good deal more than the frowns of a parson, or, for that matter, the askance looks of anybody save Yvonne, to put the Scot out of countenance and, after surveying the landscape for a moment, he returned imperturbably to his place.

" Is it all serene ? " whispered Tony, with ill-concealed anxiety.

Bob looked troubled. " I dinna ken," he replied, " we seem to be movin' at a hell o' a lick, an' we're leavin' Lake Niris on our right ; ought ta be left, oughtn't it ? "

Before Tony could answer, his Chief Officer burst into the alcove and shouldered the indignant parson unceremoniously aside.

" Will you come to the Control Room, sir ? " he whispered breathlessly ; " something wrong ! "

Without waiting for more, he dashed out again, followed immediately by the Captain and Bob, leaving the passengers in a state of utter consternation, Sir James raving like a lunatic, and poor Rosalind on the verge of hysteria. The Rev. Tobias, who had overheard the Chief Officer's words, collapsed like a pricked bubble, and it was clear that he would be worse than useless in an emergency.

Sir James hesitated; then, leaving Lady Harris to comfort the unfortunate bride, he, too, dashed along to the Control Room, where everything looked as usual, save for a group of grave-faced men staring in blank perplexity at the automatic chart. The Baronet looked out, but, beyond the fact that the airship was moving at a much higher speed than normally, nothing untoward appeared to be happening.

Momentarily reassured, his own grievance came uppermost, and he turned savagely on Tony. "What is the meaning of all this, Netherley?"

"I don't know, sir," was the quiet response.

"You—don't—know? Then what the dickens d'ye think I pay you for?—Are we in any danger?"

Tony's face flamed and his lips set ominously, but he answered evenly enough, "I can't say, sir."

Sir James was not susceptible to apoplexy, but never did he stand in greater danger of that untimely death. "Then everything's—in order?" he managed at last.

"I did not say so, sir, but until I have satisfied myself on that point, I must remain here."

"B-but how long will you be? . . . I—I mean—you know that Captain the Reverend Tobias Lawson will not officiate after three o'clock."

"I can't help that, sir. The safety . . ."

"Safety fiddlesticks!" snapped Sir James, "I insist . . ."

Tony walked up to his employer and spoke in a low, but determined voice: "Look here, sir, I must ask you to remember that I am the master of this airship, and I cannot allow any interference . . ."

"You—cannot—allow . . ."

"That is what I said, sir. Will you please leave the room."

"Well——!" The Baronet's mouth opened and shut like that of a ventriloquial figure. Several times did he essay to emit sounds from the aperture, but words would not come, and finally, after shaking his fist viciously under the Captain's nose, he strode out of the room, slamming the door behind him like a naughty child.

"Phew!" Tony mopped his forehead helplessly.  
"I shall get sacked for this."

"If we don't go to almighty smash first, sir," grinned Peter Brushett, the chief officer.

Tony had told the simple truth when he had confessed ignorance of what was wrong. Apparently everything went on as usual until about a quarter past two, whilst the airship was flying over Shiraz. Then came the curious shudder which startled her officers during the wedding ceremony, and she suddenly put on speed, changing her direction from E.S.E to E.N.E. A glance at the indicator showed that she was now travelling at nearly 220 miles an hour—more than three times normal—the new course being steadily maintained. Her rudder had become immovable, but her motors were working as usual, no more than five being in operation.

Directions were given to man the hand-wheel, which was situated in the rearmost car, but nothing happened, and a moment later the Chief Engineer phoned through to say that it was impossible to shift the rudder from there. Tony then ordered all five engines on the port side to be put in motion and the starboard ones to be stopped; this was done, and for a few seconds the airship's nose did waver southwards; the effect was only momentary, however, and almost at once she reverted to her east-north-easterly course.

It was inconceivable, preposterous, and Tony, exasperated beyond endurance, gave instructions for the whole ten motors to be reversed. With a strain perceptible throughout her fabric, the "Britain's" speed dropped to about half; then, one after another, three of her propellers splintered to fragments. Fortunately, the Chief Engineer was a man of action, and, without waiting for orders, he stopped the motors just in time to save the remaining propellers.

The Second Officer, a devout Roman Catholic, crossed himself. "She's bewitched," he said, in a scared voice.

Tony told him not to be a fool, and swung round on Bob. "Go along to the Wireless Room, Mr. Maconochie, and

try to get into touch with somewhere." The Scot departed instantly and, in the interval of waiting, the bewildered Captain tried all the elevating planes, up and down ; these were as immovable as the rudder, whilst an attempt to shift the gas-release valves proved equally futile.

"Gone phut, sir," said Bob, briefly, entering the room just as, all expedients having failed, Tony and his officers abandoned their efforts and stood gazing helplessly at one another. The Scot's remark was not precisely explicit, but it sufficed to convey that the wireless was also useless. He was not without information, however, and, beckoning his Chief to one side, he handed over another of the little slips of paper. "The Jerry sent this at a quartrer past twa," he whispered.

"Just the time . . ." muttered Tony, looking at him significantly.

Bob nodded. "What aboot it ?" he said, "shall we collar th' blighter, or d'ye think Sairr James——"

"Damn Sir James !" bawled Tony, with sudden violence. "Mr. Brushett, take two men, arrest Dr. Radocek and bring him here. Cabin number eleven."

Peter Brushett saluted and disappeared.

Whilst he was gone, Sir James burst angrily into the Control Room. "What's this I hear, Netherley ? You've given orders to arrest one of my guests ? Have you taken leave of your senses ?"

"I have good reason to believe that Dr. Radocek knows something of this affair, sir," replied Tony, calmly.

"Humbug !" snorted the Baronet ; "I—I—is everyone mad ?—I . . ." Speech failed him and, subsiding impotently into a chair, he continued to emit at intervals a succession of grunts and monosyllabic ejaculations, to which nobody paid the slightest attention.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE CONTUMACY OF SIR JAMES

SOME ten minutes passed before the Chief Officer returned, followed by two of the crew, one on either side of Dr. Radocek, who was apparently seething with indignation.

"Captain Nezzerley, I d-demand to know z-ze m-meaning of z-zis outrage!" he stuttered.

"I think you know very well, Dr. Radocek," retorted Tony, coolly, producing the four wireless messages, "but perhaps you will be good enough to translate these for us?"

The Czech paled slightly when he saw the papers, but recovered himself instantly. "I refuse to do anyzing of ze kind," he blustered; "I demand to be released, and you vill hear from my Government."

Sir James jumped up. "Dr. Radocek is perfectly right, Netherley. This *is* an outrage. You will free him instantly and apologise."

Tony ignored the angry man completely and addressed his prisoner. "Will you please translate these messages, Dr. Radocek," he said, with quiet determination.

"No! I vill not!"

"Netherley," roared Sir James, "release that man!"

"Sir James," retorted the Captain, "leave the room!"

"Certainly not!"

"Will you leave the room, or must I use force?"

The Baronet looked from one to another of the stern-faced officers, but seeing no help there, capitulated to the inevitable, merely pausing in the doorway to fire a parting shot: "You will hear from me presently, Captain Netherley."

That gentleman shrugged his shoulders and turned to Dr. Radocek. "Now, sir, are you going to translate, or are you not?"

"No!" replied the Czech, with inflexible determination.

"Very well, then, you will remain in custody until you

do." Tony paused a moment, but the prisoner gave no sign, so he went on : " Mr. Brushett, please conduct this gentleman to one of the small store-rooms and place a close guard over him. If he gives any trouble, tie him up."

The Chief Officer saluted and was about to obey when Tony stopped him. " Dr. Radocek, I need hardly remind you that, if anything happens to the airship, *you* are in it, too." He waved his hand in dismissal, and Peter Brushett departed with prisoner and guards.

" Holy Moses ! " gasped Bob, when they had gone ; " 't wud be a nasty snag if we'd got th' wrong man ! "

The skipper smiled grimly. " Looks as if we shall be beyond caring about that before we've finished," he said, " but anyhow, I stand by what I have done. and I would do it again. Now, what about these papers ? "

Bob raised his eyebrows. " De St. Launeuc ? " he queried.

Tony nodded. " You'd better get Mademoiselle to come along, too. She appears to know this Radocek bird."

Bob disappeared in search of the Frenchman and his daughter, whilst Tony set about ascertaining the airship's exact position and trying to work out where she was making for. The indicator gave her speed now as exactly 150 miles per hour, although not a motor was running, and she was heading almost exactly E.N.E.

" Looks as if we shall strike the Himalayas to-night, sir," commented Herbert Simpson, the second officer.

" Yes, if nothing else hits us first," replied Tony, significantly.

Simpson consulted the aneroid. " 13,500," he announced ; " that ought to be enough to clear any ranges this side of 'em."

The Commander glanced up from the course he was plotting. " *Ranges*, yes," he agreed, " but just look at this little brick . . ." pointing to a mountain in the eastern half of Afghanistan, ". . . Gul-Koh, 14,858 feet, and we're heading straight for it ! "

The Second Officer whistled. " When do you think we'll—er—establish contact, sir ? " he asked.

Tony made a rapid calculation. "Well, I think we're just about here now . . ." indicating Nasirabad, on the road from Jesd to Kerman, ". . . so, at this rate, we should start for glory at about a quarter to nine this evening."

"Oh, well, it gives us plenty of time, sir."

"What for? To say our prayers?"

The Second laughed. "No, sir; to get busy."

Tony shook his head. "We'll do our damndest, of course, but I'm afraid there's no doubt we are under the control of some outside force of extraordinary power; and if that's the case . . ."; he shrugged his shoulders significantly; there was no need to finish.

"Couldn't we let some of the gas go, sir?"

"As a last resource, yes; but I'm rather dubious about trying it while we are being hauled along by the nose, so to speak. It might be like falling off a horse, and getting one's foot caught in the stirrup. Besides, I don't fancy the gentry down there are any too civilised." Tony pointed to the hill region north-west of Kerman, over which they were now flying. "Not exactly ideal for landing, either," he added.

They were still watching the rugged and inhospitable landscape of Central Persia when Bob returned with M. de St. Launeuc and Yvonne. The Frenchman lost no time in scrutinising the wireless messages which were handed to him, and for a while there was silence; deep lines of thought furrowed his high forehead, and his white moustache and eyebrows seemed almost to bristle in sympathy with the intense concentration of his brain.

"I think I am erring," he said at last; "this 'Q.S.R.' . . ." pointing to the commencement of the original message, ". . . is the cipher of the Soviet Wireless Station at Teheran. I thought, therefore, that the language would be Russian, but unless the code is very complicated. . . ." M. de St. Launeuc relapsed once more into silence.

"Soviet Station at Teheran?" whispered Bob to Yvonne, "but I thocht Teheran was i' Perrsia."

"So it is."

"But the Soviet . . ."

Yvonne spread her hands in mock despair. "Oh, you innocent English . . ."

Bob's red hair bristled. "English be—be—blowed ! Ah'm a Scot !"

"*Plus ça diffère, plus c'est la même chose,*" quoted Yvonne, maliciously.

The scion of the Maconochies, of Maconochie, gasped. Ordinary language failed him, and the sex of his insulter forbade any other, quite apart from the invincibility of those tantalising dimples and sparkling eyes in any contest of wits.

"*Imbécile !*" exclaimed M. de St. Launeuc, suddenly, jolting the already shaken nerves of the "Britain's" officers with his abrupt shattering of the silence. "Pardon, Messieurs, if I startled you, but this code is of all codes the most simple, and I am standing here a quarter of an hour before—what do you say ?—spotting it."

Tony and Bob grimaced at one another ; they were thinking of the hours *they* had spent.

"Is it Russian, Monsieur ?" asked the former.

"No. German," replied de St. Launeuc, without looking up from the notebook, in which he was writing furiously.

"Then we were right th' noo," muttered Bob, with a grunt of satisfaction ; "th' mon's a Hun."

"You insult the Huns, Monsieur," put in Yvonne, bitterly ; "this Radocek, as he now calls himself, this *canaille*, is a fiend incarnate. . . ." The girl stopped abruptly, as if afraid of saying too much, and went to her father's side, where she stood looking over his shoulder.

"*Voilà ! C'est fini !*" exclaimed the Frenchman, at last. "A very charming little plot, Messieurs, which I fear we shall have the doubtful pleasure of seeing played out to the end. *Voici, Messieurs !*"

The "Britain's" officers crowded round as he displayed his notes. The code was indeed of the simplest variety—evidently intended solely for the benefit of the airship's wireless men,—consisting merely of substituting "b" for "a," "c" for "b," "d" for "c," and so on down to "z,"

for which "a" was used. Applying this principle, de St. Launeuc had reduced the terrifying hotch-potch of consonants and vowels to ordinary everyday German which he had then translated into English. The messages read as follows :—

No. 1 :—Sent by Radocek from east of Cairo :—

ORIGINAL.	GERMAN.	ENGLISH.
QSR—Tivnjbplgg Bmmft gisujh. Xfsef Fn qgbfohfs ofjn Bvgfouibmu jo Cbtcb fjtufuafo. Obxbz cfbvgusbhfo njs njuavufjmf o tpcbme Lpoublu npfhmjdi. Ebsbvgijo ufmfhsbqijfsf jdi mbhf bn axfdln- bfttjhtufo Bvhfo- cmjdl.	(Soviet Station, Teheran)—Shumiakoff. Alles fertig. Werde Empfaenger beim Aufenthalt in Basra einsetzen. Nawar beauftragen, mir mitzuteilen sobald Kontakt moeglich. Daraufhin telegrafiere ich Lage am zweck- maessigsten Augen- blick.	Everything in readi- ness. Will insert receiver when we stop at Basra. Instruct Nawar to advise me as soon as contact possible. I will then telegraph position at the most suitable moment.
Radocek. — A.S. Britain, vfcfs Xtubbsbcjfo.	Radocek. — A.S. Britain, ueber Westarabien.	Radocek. — A.S. Britain, over Western Arabia.

No. 2 :—Received over Central Arabian desert, from Teheran :—

ORIGINAL.	GERMAN.	ENGLISH.
A.S. Britain. —Radocek. Jotusvlujpofo fsibmufo voe obdi Obxbs xfjufshf- hfcfo.— Tivnjbplgg.	A.S. Britain. —Radocek. Instruktionen erhalten und nach Nawar weiterge- geben.—Shumiakoff.	A.S. Britain. —Radocek. Instructions received and passed to Nawar.— Shumiakoff.

No. 3 :—Received just west of Basra, from Nawar :—

ORIGINAL.	GERMAN.	ENGLISH.
A.S. Britain. —Radocek. Cputdibgu evsdi Tivnjbplgg fsibmufo. Lpoublu kfauav kfefs Afju npfh- mjdi. Fsxbsuf hfo b M b h f- nfmevoh.— Obsebovt.	A.S. Britain. —Radocek. Botschaft durch Shumiakoff erhalten. Kontakt jetzt zu jeder Zeit moeg- lich. Erwarte genaue Lage- meldung.— Nardanus.	A.S. Britain. —Radocek. Message received from Shumiakoff. Contact possible at any time now. Await advice re position.— Nardanus.

No. 4 :—Sent by Radocek from over Shiraz :—

ORIGINAL.	GERMAN.	ENGLISH.
QXT—Obsebokt.	QXT—Nardanus.	QXT—Nardanus.
H f s b e f v f c f s	Gerade ueber	Exactly over
Tdijsbt.	Shiras.	Shiraz.
Lpoublu	Kontakt	Effect contact im-
tpgpsu nbdifo.—	sofort machen.—	mediately.—
Radocek.	Radocek.	Radocek.

"Unfortunately," grumbled Tony, when he had digested the various effusions, "these little *billets-doux* don't tell us how it was done. Electricity, presumably, but how? That is the question."

"Wirreless," suggested Bob, brightly.

The Captain looked fixedly at his friend. "Not a bit of it," he growled, with blistering sarcasm; "the blighters have hitched us up to a three-inch cable."

Yvonne intervened at this point, partly to elicit information, and partly out of sympathy with the Scot, who was vainly searching for a suitable retort. "Who is Nardanus, *mon papa*, and where or what is Nawar?"

"I do not know," replied de St. Launeuc. "Shumiakoff is the Soviet envoy at Teheran, of course, but I have never heard of Nardanus. As for Nawar, I suppose it is a town, but where . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Nawar—Nawar," murmured Tony, reflectively; "I seem to have struck the name recently."

"Here it is, sir," interrupted the Second Officer, his finger on the map they had just been consulting; "Lake Nawar, just by that mountain you mentioned—Gul-Koh."

"Evidently our destination," commented Tony, verifying the Second's information.

"Weel, laddie," said Bob, "there's more i' yon spot than met th' eye o' th' carrtographer." This was obvious enough, since according to the map, Nawar was a small lake of doubtful shape and size, completely enclosed by great hills, and touching the western slopes of the mountain.

"There's one thing, sir," put in the Second Officer; "if we're controlled from there and we miss Gul-Koh, we shan't go butting into the Himalayas later in the evening."

"That's true," admitted Tony, "but we're not going

near Gul-Koh or Lake Nawar, if I can only find out how this patent gadget of theirs works."

"Hoo about marrchin' th' Jerry round i' front o' a gun, an' makin' him turrn it off?" suggested Bob.

"No use," said Yvonne, shaking her head slowly; "cowardice is nearly the only vice with which he is not afflicted."

"Ye mean, ma'm'selle, th' mon'd juist tell us ta shoot an' be—er—blowed?"

"*Parfaitement.*"

At this point, Tony suddenly remembered that Dr. Radocek had been seen coming from the Control Room whilst the airship was lying at Basra, and he immediately instituted a minute examination of every inch of the controls and other apparatus, assisted by his first and second officers, the former having just returned.

Their efforts were fruitless, however, and once more they had to acknowledge utter impotence before this unknown force which had the luckless "Britain" in its deadly grip.

It would be wearisome to describe the airship's headlong flight over Persia and Afghanistan in detail, to write of all their vain attempts to deflect her from that demon straight line to the east-north-east, of the numberless subterfuges they employed to keep knowledge from her passengers until the end, of the constantly recurring scenes with Sir James about what he termed the "infamous incarceration" of Dr. Radocek. The afternoon and evening of that fateful twenty-ninth of July were like a nightmare to all who knew the truth, a miasma of confused comings and goings, disjointed conversations, forlorn hopes that failed, and the Baronet's never-ending current of criticism, with its periodical explosions of insane ferocity, pervading the whole craft. Rosalind and her mother had retired to the former's cabin, and it is to be feared that Tony gave but little thought to his all-but bride, save impersonally, as one of the human beings committed to his care, whom he was powerless to protect.

Mile after mile and league after league they flew, across the salt desert of Lut and the hills of eastern Persia; then

over the barren lands of western Afghanistan to the Ghor Mountains—fresh and green after the arid plains—their straggling ranges interspersed with sudden valleys, in whose depths gleamed the silver strands of mountain torrents and the broader ribbons of full-grown rivers. Away to the north, almost parallel with the “Britain’s” course, stretched the wooded slopes of the Sir-i-Kuh range, mounting here and there to snow-capped peaks, but for the most part the country was barren and desolate; indeed, from this height, there seemed little to choose between the inhabited areas and the two vast deserts of Margo and Registan to the south, waterless, save for the majestic River Helmund and a few minor streams from the mountains of Baluchistan beyond.

Dinner was served at the usual time. As Tony said, why not?—Heaven knew where their next meal was coming from, or, for that matter, if they would ever get another. The function was not a success, for amongst the officers and the few others who had been told (including the Matthiesons and Alan Merton), there was a tension which not even a modern Cabinet Minister could have failed to notice. Besides, that little matter of the postponed wedding required a deal of explaining, although the thundercloud on Sir James’ face assisted considerably in discouraging curiosity. To the general relief, he retired to his cabin before dinner was over, but the advance-guards of night were deploying across the sky ere anyone else made a move.

Fortunately, owing to the possibility of a forced landing in wild country, the airship carried arms, and defensive plans were matured during the afternoon, as far as it was possible to make arrangements in advance for meeting an unknown and intangible danger. Rifles were served out to the crew, who manned the stern cars, whilst Tony and Peter Brushett, Bob, the Matthiesons, Alan Merton and de St. Launeuc, all provided with revolvers, remained in the centrally-placed magazine, ready to move to any part of the craft at need. In the Control Room were posted the Second Officer and the steersman, with orders

to act on their own responsibility should anything occur to release the "Britain" from her bondage.

Dusk had fallen, and the brief twilight was surrendering to night ere Tony, with some misgivings, ordered the lights to be switched on. Normally, current was drawn from dynamos worked by the motors, but when the latter were not running—as in the present instance—accumulators were used.

"Some light!" commented Jimmie Matthieson, as the burners began to glow, for the feeble glimmer which resulted barely sufficed to illuminate the lamp-shades.

"Dairry dogs!" exclaimed Bob; "they ha' snaffled oor light, too."

As he spoke, a vibration from the rear announced that the engines had been set going, whilst the light visibly improved, and Tony rushed forward to investigate.

"She began to slow down, sir," reported the Second, excitedly, as his Chief entered the Control Room, "so I ordered the motors. . . ." He broke off to struggle with the helm. "Damn it, sir! We got the wheel to move just now."

"Mr. Simpson," gasped Tony, "tell 'em to stop the motors again. I believe the skunks are using our own current!"

The Second obeyed, and immediately the lights dropped to a bare glimmer once more, whilst a glance at the indicator showed the "Britain's" speed to be falling well below the 150 miles per hour which had been maintained all day.

"You've hit it, sir!" exclaimed Simpson.

Tony looked at his watch; half-past eight! They must be close to Lake Nawar now, but there was just time.

"Mr. Simpson," he ordered, "I'm going to put every one of the accumulators out of action. 'Phone McNaughten to cut off the dynamos, too, and, as soon as the lights go right out, he's to let her rip with every ounce of power he can raise. You'll turn to the south.—Remember you can't use the 'phone when the current's gone."

Without waiting for the Second's "Very good, sir," Tony was away down the corridor like a man possessed. He called to Bob in passing, and together they tackled the

accumulator contacts. Complete darkness reigned as they severed the last pair of wires, and the humming of the motors in immediate response showed that his orders had been well and truly carried out.

"Just in time!" he ejaculated, mopping his forehead, but hardly were the words out of his mouth than——

Crack!—Crack!—Crack! Three revolver shots rang out from somewhere up in front.

Within a fraction of a second, Tony was blundering along the narrow gangways in the pitchy blackness, Bob close at his heels. Bruised in every limb from violent contacts with odd corners, they had just reached the foremost car when a flicker of light appeared behind them, and the magazine party came running up with hurricane lanterns.

"It's Radocek, I think," gasped Colonel Matthieson; "Sir James let him out!"

"Shoot 'em both on sight!" snapped Tony, starting to run again. "Come on!"

Bob was first in the Control Room, the door of which stood wide open. Silhouetted against a window swayed the lank and unmistakable form of Dr. Radocek. The Scot fired, almost without aim, but he made no mistake, and the Czech crashed floorwards, shot clean through the head.

Some of the others were already on the spot with their lanterns, whose uncertain light disclosed the dead bodies of the unfortunate steersman and Simpson, the former sagging over the wheel, whilst the latter had one hand on a lever and still clutched his revolver with the other.

From adjoining cabins came the cries of women, and here and there doors opened, as a few bolder spirits amongst the men ventured forth.

The First Officer seized the wheel and spun it round for dear life, whilst Tony sprang instantly to the controls, but too late!

A yell of "Look out!" burst from Jimmie Matthieson as the starlit sky vanished behind a great black mass. Almost simultaneously came the sound of rending and tearing, followed by a crash which shot them all into the bows. The next instant, they were falling—falling——

## CHAPTER V

### THROUGH THE TUNNEL

"DAMN!"—

A world of feeling, crammed into the monosyllable, betokened that the speaker's demise was not a matter of immediate concern.

"That yersel', Tony, laddie?" asked another voice, the Scottish brogue cutting its way through the darkness.

"I—I think so," came Tony's rather hesitating reply, followed by a soul-satisfying expletive when he tried to move. "Left ankle sprained," he added, by way of extenuation.

"Awa' wi' yer grizzlin', mon!" retorted Bob; "Ah'm tryin' ta find a joint that *isna'* sprained."

A groan from somewhere on the right broke into the conversation.

"Another one saved from the wreck," commented Tony; "who's there?"

"That you, Netherley?" said Jimmie Matthieson's voice; "where'n hell are we?"

"Just what I'm wondering," replied the first speaker; "seems to be solid earth under us.—Say, is anybody else about?"

Silence reigned for a moment; then something stirred close by Bob.

"Wha's there?" asked the latter.

A muttering answered him, and he was cautiously rolling over to investigate, when it resolved itself into, "*Nom d'un nom d'un . . .*"

"De St. Launeuc," said Tony; "that's four.—Hullo! Wasn't that a light?"

A faint flicker had gleamed suddenly, and as suddenly disappeared, almost as if a light had passed the other side of a window.

"I didna' see 't," replied Bob, but even as he spoke

a door creaked and a man appeared before them, carrying a lantern. The newcomer, who was tall and thin, with copper complexion and flowing white beard, wore a white robe something like a "toga," bordered with red, and his whole appearance was impressive in the extreme, not to say awe-inspiring.

As far as could be distinguished in the dim light of the lantern, they were squatting on the earthen floor of a long, low, wooden hut, innocent of furniture, but provided with glass windows. The most striking thing about the place was a frieze, painted on the walls, astonishingly like those found in the temples of ancient Egypt. They had no time for a closer examination, however; indeed, the old man's first words put everything else clean out of their heads, for he spoke in almost perfect English, with the barest suspicion of some accent which none of his hearers could identify.

"I am glad to see you are recovering, my friends," he said, "since we have no time to lose. You are able to walk?"—The speaker glanced from one to another as he asked the question, and then glided over to Tony, who had collapsed whilst trying to rise.

"Ah! Your ankle. I feared so," was his comment; "one moment, please." He went to the door and whistled softly, whereupon two men entered, bearing a sort of litter, which they set down beside Tony. These men were dressed in the same style as the first-comer, but were obviously of a different race, being much darker-skinned and more blunt of feature. At a sign from the old man, the Englishman was lifted gently into the litter, whilst the others, still very shaky, but able to walk without assistance, scrambled to their feet.

They followed him outside, the litter bringing up the rear, and found themselves on a rough mountain path, bordered by towering cliffs on the one hand and a deep ravine on the other. The night was black as pitch, only the stars overhead showing where earth stopped and sky began, whilst of the airship there was no sign.

An attempt on Bob's part to ask questions was met by

a curt command for silence from their guide, whose manner now was nervously apprehensive ; every few yards, he would turn round and peer into the darkness behind them, until the whole party began to share his anxiety, although they had not the faintest idea of its cause.

They stumbled along the pebble-strewn track for perhaps a quarter of a mile, as far as a spot where the wall of rock on their right receded several yards from the path. At this point, the old man turned aside and, scrambling round a huge boulder, traversed a patch of rough soil to the cliff, along the foot of which he felt his way until he reached a narrow cleft. Followed closely by the now hopelessly bewildered trio and the litter party, he entered the gap, which seemed to penetrate into the heart of the mountain, zig-zagging fantastically this way and that, but ending finally in what appeared to be a cul-de-sac.

Here, he repeated the whistle previously used to call the bearers, and a section of the rock in front disappeared, leaving a yawning black opening, into which he forthwith plunged. The others followed—there was nothing else to do—and, immediately the litter was in, the rock swung to behind it.

By this time, the eyes of the castaways were getting more accustomed to the gloom, on which at first the light of the old man's lantern had made no visible impression, and they were now able to walk with greater confidence. The tunnel, into which they had penetrated, wound almost as fantastically as the cleft which led up to it ; then suddenly, after negotiating several "hair-pin bends," it opened into a large cave, in which were squatting or standing half-a-dozen men, all dressed in the same archaic fashion. Each of them had a lantern, but the united light was only sufficient to illuminate a twenty-foot patch in the centre of the cave, where another litter was standing.

"Cheerio, gentlemen!" came a voice from beneath its hangings, as they entered.

"Peter Brrushett, by a' that's holy!" exclaimed Bob ; "hoo did ye get here, mon?"

"Carried," replied the voice, succinctly ; "one leg busted and one arm ditto."

"Harrd lines," commiserated the Scot.

"Oh, I'm not worrying," said the First Officer, cheerfully ; "might have been worse. Who's in the other taxi?"

"The skipper. Sprained ankle," answered Bob, briefly.

There was no time for more, as the white-robed men, obeying orders issued in an unknown tongue by he-of-the-beard, were preparing to move.

"We must proceed, my friends," went on the old man, turning to the castaways ; "we have over five miles to accomplish, and the distance must be covered before daylight, or the consequences will be unpleasant for all of us."

"Five — ! Holy smoke !" ejaculated Bob, and relapsed into dismal silence.

Not one of the unfortunate quintet is ever likely to forget that awful journey, least of all the two men who were being carried. Tony afterwards measured the distance on a map, and, assuming the tunnel to have been correctly plotted, its length was five-and-a-quarter miles ; Bob recommended him to go to school again, intimating somewhat acidly that *twenty-five-and-a-quarter* would be nearer the mark, whilst Jimmie Matthieson wanted to double even that. As was only to be expected, none of the party had escaped unscathed, and, indeed, it was a miracle that their injuries were so insignificant. Of the three who walked, de St. Launeuc was in the worst plight. Bob and Jimmie were both fairly well-covered, although their bones were bruised to an excruciating extent, despite the protecting flesh. The Frenchman, however, was of a build more useful when being fired at than in a rough and tumble ; tall and skinny, his bones had received the full force of the crash, and in view of his age, it was really remarkable that none of them were broken. Nevertheless, to use Jimmie's phrase, he was a "game old bird," and not a minute did they lose on the way through any fault of his. Their guide, too, seemed tireless, although he must

have been at least seventy ; but then, his body had not been used as a football.

The tunnel, which recommenced on the opposite side of the big cavern, was apparently a natural formation, volcanic in origin, but here and there its walls bore traces of the work of man. For the most part, the rock was smooth and black, whilst the roof varied in height from five feet to an indeterminate figure, which might have been anything from thirty to fifty. Fortunately for the castaways, only very short stretches were less than six feet high, but even then both de St. Launeuc and Jimmie added to the array of bruises on their heads. After the first mile, which was intolerably tortuous, the tunnel ran in a fairly straight line, though the floor was diabolical, not only by reason of its irregularity, but also because it was decidedly concave ; the general effect, in fact, was that of a tube more or less oval in section.

It must be admitted that the Europeans were too fully occupied with their physical discomforts to worry overmuch concerning the reasons for this strange journey,—whither they were bound and why, where they were, who and what their guides might be, the whereabouts of the rest of the " Britain's " complement, and a thousand similar problems which would otherwise have been clamouring for solution.

Now that they were underground, the old man made no further objection to their talking, but he sternly discouraged any attempt to elicit information, concentrating entirely on reaching his goal—whatever that might be—with the least possible delay.

Jimmie Matthieson, who was familiar with the North-West Frontier, definitely asserted that the litter-bearers were Afghans, but the others were just as definitely *not* Afghans, and he confessed himself entirely unable even to guess at their race. De St. Launeuc was puzzled, too,—when his aches and pains allowed him a moment's respite to consider the question. The presence of the Afghans was a matter of course ; Persians, Indians or Russians—especially the latter—would not have surprised him ; but their guides were entirely dissimilar from any of these

races, and he was, moreover, quite unable to reconcile their rather kind, if grave, faces with those of men having even the slightest relations with Soviet Russia. It was, indeed, fairly obvious that he and the other castaways had fallen into friendly hands, but who?—What?—How? “*Que de diable! Ce sont des questions——!*” and he would have shrugged his shoulders in true Gallic fashion, had the effort not been too painful.

The last two miles were decidedly downhill, whilst the work of nature bore increasing signs of having been assisted by man, until at length the marks of tools on the solid rock became continuous and remained so to the end of the tunnel. It came rather abruptly at last; they had been descending a steep slope for some hundreds of yards, and this terminated in a long flight of steps, giving on to a small, square chamber, which was obviously artificial. Here, the old man signed to them to remain where they were, whilst he himself went forward and—pressed a modern electric button in the farther wall! For some seconds nothing happened; then a section of rock swung inwards and he passed through, followed by the litter-bearers.

“Well! Dog—bite—me!” exclaimed Jimmie, using his favourite expression of astonishment.

There being no dog handy, the request was not granted, but Bob obligingly pinched him—on a sore spot—in order to prove he was not dreaming.

The old man returned ere Jimmie had finished making ungrateful remarks, and beckoned them to follow. They obeyed with a promptitude which somehow seemed entirely natural when dealing with this strange individual, and a moment later they found themselves out in the cool night air, standing on a platform of rock some fifteen yards square, cut into the hillside. At the rear and on either hand rose blank rock, too high to permit of seeing what lay behind, but along its front edge, barely visible in the starlight, ran a narrow road, from the other side of which came the sound of running water. Beyond both road and river, a terrific precipice rose sheer, and they were just wondering why they were being kept waiting on the

platform instead of taking to the road, along which they naturally assumed the litters had been carried, when—

Swish!—A big black object swept down out of the darkness and landed beside Jimmie Matthieson. Three hands went automatically to three hip-pockets, but were withdrawn almost at once without the revolvers, although these had not been taken away.

"Dog—bite—me!" begged Jimmie again; "it's a bally aerial ropeway!"

Sure enough, it was, and the object which had startled them was nothing more formidable than a car of the type usual on such systems.

"Enter, my friends, if you please," said he-of-the-beard; "it will hold five. The litters are already on the way up."

They accordingly scrambled over the side, followed by the old man, and a pleasant breeze fanned their heated faces and sore heads as they were drawn swiftly skywards. The car came to rest on a platform cut in the face of the precipice, where they alighted and entered a second car, which carried them up to yet another platform.

"I fear you have a stiff climb before you now," said their guide, "but we are nearly at our destination." Without further ado, he crossed over to a flight of steps, also cut in the cliff-face, and protected on the outside by a flimsy hand-rail.

"Stiff climb" was an under-statement. There were hundreds of steps, zig-zagging back and forth up the precipice, and, by the time the castaways reached the top—again a mere platform—they were half dead, staggering like drunken men, and trembling all over. Their guide did not seem in the least incommoded, but he considerably paused to allow them to pull themselves together, afterwards leading the way to yet a third car, into which they tumbled incontinently and collapsed in a heap on the floor, whilst the now familiar swish came to their ears as it sped upwards.

"Our destination, my friends," said the old man, when the car finally came to rest, and its passengers, after one or two vain attempts, succeeded in clambering out. Wearily

they followed across an open space, the floor of which was of solid rock, smooth and flat, but beyond barely noticing the outline of a huge building on the right, they were too dead-beat to worry about anything save finding a place in which to rest their aching limbs.

For some two hundred yards they walked—or rather, staggered—in the old man's wake, bringing up at last in front of a low building, which stretched away into the darkness on either hand. Their guide entered and turned to the left along a narrow corridor, passing several doors, and finally stopping before one at the extreme end. He flung it wide with a regal gesture and bowed hospitably.

"Your quarters for the present, my friends. I regret our space does not permit of separate rooms, but I trust you will be comfortable, nevertheless. You desire to sleep, no doubt? Do so, by all means. Then, when you awake, press the electric bell in the wall, and food will be brought to you. Good night, and rest assured that you are in safe hands."

It was the longest speech he had yet made, and his somewhat pedantic utterance was more marked than previously, but there was no mistaking the kindly feeling underlying his words, and it was with genuine appreciation that the castaways thanked him and entered the room, which, like the corridor, was lit by electricity.

It was large, although not lofty, almost luxuriously furnished, and contained—oh, blessing of blessings!—three real beds, with real sheets and all the trappings of civilisation.

Jimmie apostrophised his friend the dog again, but neither he nor the others attempted to fathom the meaning of it all; within ten minutes, they had switched off the light and were exploring the peaceful depths of that sleep which is popularly supposed to be reserved for the just.

## CHAPTER VI

### MYRTIS

A GLOW of grateful warmth enveloping his foot and stealing soothingly up his leg, instead of the intolerable ache of which he had last been conscious ; a feeling of physical well-being and soft comfort, replacing the solid block of bruises and weariness which had been his body when he fell asleep : these were Tony's first sensations as he slowly drifted back to consciousness. For some time he lay with eyes closed, his mind a blank, lazily and thankfully revelling in present bliss, careless of where he might be and content that this altogether desirable state of affairs should continue indefinitely.

Then, as the mists of sleep thinned and finally dispersed, leaving his brain clear, but indolently disinclined for exertion, he became aware that someone was bathing his ankle, gently and tenderly handling bruised flesh and battered bone. Memory was returning now : the fight in the Control Room, the smash, then the strange old man and his white-robed attendants, the litter and that awful trek through the tunnel's never-ending miles, a weird journey under the stars in a gadget that whizzed through the air,—incident after incident came back, like the confused adventures of some fantastic dream, born of good living and bad discretion.

Well, who was the good Samaritan bathing his ankle, anyway ? He opened his eyes and tried to squint along the bed—good Lord ! Yes ! It *was* a bed in which he was lying !—but his head was not high enough, so he abandoned the attempt, to lie indolently staring at the ceiling and at what was visible of the walls. The former was of some light wood, supported by beams of a darker kind, whilst round the top of the walls ran a frieze similar to the one he now remembered seeing the night before—*was* it the night

before, though? Tony gave it up, deciding it would be easier to ask questions than to deduce answers.

Meanwhile, his slight movement had warned the good Samaritan that he was awake, and his foot was being stowed snugly away under the bedclothes again. The next moment, someone was bending over him, a soft hand was laid on his forehead, and a low sweet voice was asking him in hesitating English, spoken with a slight but fascinating accent, how he felt. He found himself gazing up into a pair of sympathetic grey eyes—at least, he knew they were sympathetic and he felt pretty sure they were grey—set in a charming oval face, which was crowned with a mass of red-gold hair, dressed more or less after the Greek manner, with a band of something that sparkled round the pure white forehead. The girl, who could not have been more than twenty, was dressed just as archaically as the men, her white robe, gold embroidered, falling in graceful folds from the shoulders, where it was secured with jewelled fastenings; her satin arms were bare, and she wore neither bracelets nor earrings; but a jewelled girdle, which, if the stones were real, was of fabulous worth, encircled her slender waist, its tasseled ends hanging loosely down in front.

Tony caught his breath, and her charm, coupled with the unexpectedness of her appearance, rendered him momentarily incapable of replying to her solicitous query.

“Oh, top-hole!” he managed at last.

The girl wrinkled her forehead in puzzled thought. “Top hole?” she repeated, interrogatively.

The Englishman grinned cheerfully. “Oh, that means jolly fine—good—well; and—and all that sort of thing, you know.”

She smiled back at him comprehendingly—*some* dimples, by Jove!—and said, “I understand. It is vulgar—no, that is not right.—Slang?” He nodded.

“I am glad you are better,” she went on; “and oh, you must be so hungry.”

“Rather!” he replied, enthusiastically. This use of the word was evidently unfamiliar to her, but there was no

mistaking the tone, and she accordingly pressed a button near by. An Afghan entered almost immediately with a tray, which he deposited on a small table, whilst the girl helped Tony to sit upright and carefully propped him in position with pillows. The room was of much the same size as that into which the others had been taken, and was likewise luxuriously furnished. Broad daylight came in at three fair-sized windows facing Tony's bed, and through them he could see a line of rugged hills many miles away, culminating, on the extreme right of his field of view, in a great peak. Of solid earth, apart from these mountains, there was nothing to be seen, so his gaze quickly returned to the good fairy at his bedside, who was preparing to feed him with a spoon.

"Oh, I say, you know," he exclaimed, "I can do that myself." Then, noticing a sudden hurt look on her face, he added quickly, "Now don't be angry. You see, in my country, a man doesn't let a woman wait on him if he can do it himself."

Her expression cleared at once, although bewilderment remained. "How strange!" was all she said, and then sat down on the edge of the bed whilst he ate his breakfast, which consisted of something resembling porridge, made with goat's milk, and real coffee.

Silence reigned until Tony had taken the sharp edge off his appetite, when curiosity became too insistent to be suppressed. He began by asking her name.

"Myrtis," was the reply.

It fitted admirably, he thought, but surely she had a surname, and he put the question.

"No. Just Myrtis," she answered; "and what is yours?"

The Englishman hesitated. Hang it! If she had no surname, then why bother about his own? It would be much nicer—

"Tony," he said.

"Tony," she repeated after him, with that indescribably fascinating pronunciation. "But, Tony, *you* have a surname. Everyone has in your country."

"Rumbled!" he thought. Myrtis evidently knew more than he had supposed.

"Well," he acknowledged, "my full name is Anthony Victor Murray Netherley."

The girl's eyes widened. "But do people say all that when they want to speak to you?"

"Hardly. They call me 'Captain Netherley.'—But I'd much rather *you* said 'Tony,'" he added, hastily, deliberately ignoring conscience, which hurled the one word "Rosalind" at him.

Myrtis looked straight into his eyes and then lowered her own, the suspicion of a blush warming her cheeks. "I do not believe I ought," she murmured, "but since you wish it, I will—Tony."

"Thanks," he said, with fatuous inadequacy.

At that moment, something stirred, and he realised suddenly that they were not alone. Turning round, he saw there was another bed, over in a corner, which his previous casual survey had overlooked. Myrtis jumped up hastily and went across to it, leaving Tony feeling disgracefully and most unreasonably jealous at sharing her attentions with anyone else. Who was it? he wondered.

A familiar voice from behind the bedclothes enlightened him. "Is that you, sir? Peter Brushett here."

"Morning!" called out Tony; "how are you feeling?"

"Fine, sir. My bones have been set, and whoever did it knew his job."

In response to Myrtis' summons, the Afghan entered with another tray, and the girl came across to Tony, a look of enquiry in her eyes:

"Is it permitted to wait on—Peter?" she asked.

Tony tried to keep a straight face, but failed completely. "Oh, yes, that's all right," he told her, "*Mr. Brushett* cannot possibly do it himself."

Without a word, she went back, and the wily one heard her announce, "*Mr. Brushett, Captain Netherley* says I must wait on you. Please open your mouth."

An ominous gurgle came from Peter Brushett's bed. "Heaven send he doesn't do the 'nose trick,'" muttered Tony; but, fortunately, the victim of that gentleman's instructions in the conventions of society mastered his feelings and finished his breakfast without disgracing himself.

Meanwhile, his superior's brain had been busy with their problems, and, in spite of having so delightful a nurse, he cursed the mischance which was keeping him confined to bed when he ought to be up and doing. Presently a sound of singing distracted his thoughts, and he realised that it had been going on for some time. Sounds like a church, he thought; then, aloud :

"Myrtis, who is that singing?"

"Priestesses in the Temple of Isis," she replied.

"Wha-a-t? B-but where?"

"Here, on this rock. You passed it the night before last, in the darkness."

The night before last! So he must have slept the clock round twice, or very nearly! Where were the others, then? And, in Heaven's name, what was a Temple of Isis doing in Afghanistan, more than two thousand miles from Egypt,—to say nothing of its being apparently in full working order? Why, the worship of Isis had been dead these two thousand years, surely! The thing was perfectly preposterous! Here they expected to find themselves in the clutches of Bolsheviks and, instead, they were being treated with the utmost kindness by folk who worshipped Isis and used electricity, to say nothing of occidental furniture and an ultra-modern aerial ropeway!

"You know, Brushett," he called out at last, "if somebody doesn't explain something shortly, I shall go clean batty!"

"Same here, sir. I say, Miss—er—Myrtis, who set my arm and leg?"

"Rames," she replied. "He brought you here."

"Oh, was that the old buff—h'm—gentleman with the beard?" asked Tony.

"Yes. He is the High Priest of Isis, and is Master on

this rock. No doubt he will make all clear to you in due time."

"Heaven let it be soon!" murmured Tony, fervently.

Meanwhile, the other three, having slept almost as long, were discussing the situation over breakfast. Not having any charming, English-speaking maiden to wait upon *them*, and their combined knowledge of Oriental language not being equal to Pushtu (the tongue of the Afghans), they were at an even greater loss. Consequently, as soon as the claims of the inner man had been dealt with, they set out on a voyage of discovery, taking their strange hosts' permission for granted.

Not knowing quite what to expect, the three men were prepared for something out of the ordinary; but the scene that actually met their eyes when they emerged into the open brought a gasp of amazement from every throat.

The building stood at one corner of the levelled-off summit of a single pinnacle of rock, which rose sheer on all sides. The irregularly-shaped plateau thus formed, measuring perhaps four hundred yards by two hundred, was occupied almost entirely by a great temple, whose architecture was unmistakably Egyptian. From this edifice came the sound of singing, so they thought it wiser not to attempt an entry, and, indeed, there was plenty to occupy their minds, without offending other people's religious susceptibilities.

To the west and north, sweeping round in a wide curve, lay the glittering waters of Lake Nawar, fully 7,000 feet below, and hemmed in on all sides by gigantic precipices. About thirty miles long by ten wide, no shore was visible save on the south-east, where the cliffs receded and a triangular shelf of cultivated land projected its apex into the lake.

The pinnacle of rock on which the travellers were perched stood solitary, an extraordinary freak of nature, near the southern extremity of these fields, which stretched some ten miles to the north and five miles westwards at the

widest part. Four miles away to the south-east rose a magnificent peak—evidently Gul-Koh,—from whose slopes a mountain torrent tumbled headlong over two waterfalls and hurled itself against the great rock, which split it clean in twain, sending one affluent to join the curve of Lake Nawar on the north, and the other westwards to where a village straggled round the quays of a tiny harbour. Perched on a platform, cut in the mountain-side just by the first of these waterfalls, was a small cluster of buildings, from which overhead cables stretched to the pinnacle and to a great edifice at the south-east corner of the lake, perhaps a mile-and-a-half south from the travellers' point of vantage.

The latter building was perched high up on a flank of the mountains ; it strongly resembled a fort, being surrounded by two great walls, at each angle of which, as well as from each corner of the main structure, rose an enormous tower. The huge size of this edifice, however, seemed rather to preclude the idea that it was nothing *more* than a fort, and the three men experienced a lively curiosity as to what might lie behind those forbidding walls—a subject on which they were to be only too well-informed in days to come.

Meanwhile, the singing had ceased, and white-robed men and women were emerging in twos and threes from the temple, glancing curiously at the Europeans as they passed. That these people were not all of one race was manifest ; some of them had skins only slightly brown, like Rames' ; others were native to the region—probably Afghans, whilst a few were unmistakably white.

" Well, dog—bite—me ! " muttered Jimmie, " of all the mix-ups ! —Hullo ! Here's beaver."

Rames came up and greeted them, his manner still dignified, but friendly as ever.

" You were looking for your airship ? " he enquired.

Jimmie confessed, rather sheepishly, that they had forgotten all about it.

Rames smiled gravely. " Well, it is not visible from here because of those mountains," he explained, pointing to a great range joining Gul-Koh from the west ; " the

wreck occurred on another ridge immediately behind, and, fortunately for yourselves, quite close to the entrance to our tunnel ; but when you have eaten, we will discuss these matters further. Meanwhile, you will find your two friends in the room next your own : A meal will be served to you there, and I will join you later."

The reunion was a cheery one, but the presence of Myrtis brought back in full force to Bob's heart a dull ache, of which he had been only too bitterly aware ever since consciousness returned. De St. Launeuc felt it, too, and although nothing was said, each knew well what the other's thoughts were.

Where was Yvonne ?—Where, for that matter, was the rest of the " Britain's " human freight ? But neither the Scot nor the Frenchman worried much about the others, as was, after all, only natural. Had Yvonne been killed ? Or if not, was she lying, bruised and broken, somewhere on those inhospitable hills ? Or had she fallen into the hands of the Bolsheviks, if there were any ? Perhaps Rames would set their minds at rest when he came ; Heaven send that he could !

Tony had his own heartache, too,—equally poignant, if not so tragic. Not given to self-deception, he frankly admitted to himself that he had fallen in love with Myrtis, this fair worshipper of a forgotten goddess. That she returned his love, he could not—dared not—believe, but whether it were so or not, his position was anything but enviable. If she did not, he was of all men the most miserable ; if she did, then what about Rosalind, to whom he was pledged ? Was *she* still alive ? It was not easy to avoid harbouring an unworthy hope, but Anthony Netherley was no cur, and he sternly dismissed the thought from his mind. He, too, could only await the advent of Rames, who might or might not be able to give him news.

Meanwhile, the hours dragged slowly on——

## CHAPTER VII

### PRISONERS

YVONNE DE ST. LAUNEUC came to herself in a small, gloomy apartment, the furnishings of which were scanty, but of irreproachable quality. She was lying on a wooden bedstead of considerable age, and although the coverings were more or less civilised, its mattress was of an iron-hardness to which modern bones are unaccustomed.

Daylight filtered ineffectively through the glass upper half of a screen which divided the room into two, but her wrist-watch had stopped and there was no means of ascertaining the time. Refreshed by a long sleep, although conscious of a myriad aches in every bone, she lay for some time, little by little recalling the incidents immediately preceding her last waking moment.

Things had moved so quickly after dinner that awful night, that she could form no very clear idea of the sequence of events. She knew that some of the gentlemen, including her father, had gone to support the officers and crew in case of trouble, but the rest was a confused medley of apparently disconnected happenings. She remembered sitting on the edge of her bunk, conversing spasmodically with Rosalind Harris, who badly needed cheering up, poor girl. She recollects the lights coming on, at first dimly, then brighter—alternately waxing and waning—until finally they vanished altogether, and the girls huddled together for mutual comfort in the pitch darkness which ensued. Then there was a disturbance some distance away, gradually coming nearer; she heard the voice of Sir James, raised in expostulation and mingled with the deeper tones of Dr. Radocek; presently, the Baronet seemed to have been swallowed up,—at least, one could no longer hear him. Afterwards, came stealthy footsteps past her cabin, followed by shots in the Control Room, whereupon the whole airship

burst into uproar. A young army came running along the passage, revolvers were being fired indiscriminately (as it seemed), and finally the suspense became so unbearable that she and Rosalind went out into the corridor, where already the excited passengers were congregating ; but before any questions could be asked, let alone answered, the noise up in front was renewed. Colonel Matthieson and Alan Merton dashed out of the Control Room, shouting something inaudible, and the next moment there came a fearful crash, whilst the floor tilted at a terrifying angle. Rosalind clutched at her waist for support, and together they were hurled against a partition, merciful oblivion enveloping them on the instant.

What had happened after that, she could not even conjecture. Evidently she had been rescued, but by whom ? A cold thrill of horror coursed through her veins as a vision of Dr. Radocek flashed into her mind's eye ; if she were in his or his friends' power, then God help her ! Man could not !

Wide awake now, the ghastly possibilities of her position crowding in upon her, she sat bolt upright and tried to see more of this place. Something stirred at her side as she moved, and jangled nerves almost betrayed her into screaming ; biting her lip, she bent over to see who or what her bed-fellow might be, dreading enlightenment, yet demanding it.—Only Rosalind, thank God ! But, mingled with relief, were self-contempt and the determination to pull herself together : Yvonne de St. Launeuc frightened out of her life at—Rosalind ! Perhaps, after all, they had fallen into civilised hands ; to be sure, it behoved them to keep eyes and ears open, but nothing was to be gained by panic, and—she was a de St. Launeuc.

Somewhat calmer, the French girl stepped cautiously to the floor, straightened her clothes—she was still in evening dress—and tidied her hair in front of a small mirror. A few steps brought her to the glass screen, on the other side of which was a nondescript apartment, bare, save for a table and two or three chairs. Opening a door in the screen, she stole to the far end, where daylight entered through two

small windows, one on either side of another door. The latter gave on to a wide stone gallery, whose outer wall was pierced at intervals by big embrasures, open to the air.

This door also yielded to her touch, and she emerged on to the gallery, glancing nervously to right and left. The place was silent as the grave, however, so, after a moment's hesitation, she crossed to one of the embrasures. Ever appreciative of natural beauty, the view brought a gasp of wonder from her lips. Far below glittered the blue waters of a lake, bordered on the left by forbidding cliffs, whilst beyond it towered a great range of mountains, gaunt and wild, but indescribably magnificent. For some minutes she stood, drinking in the rugged glory of the scene, and letting the silent peace of it soothe her jangled nerves, banishing unworthy fears and infusing new life into her veins.

Reluctantly enough, Yvonne at last turned her back on the embrasure and repaired to the inner room, where Rosalind was already awake and gazing round in utter bewilderment.

"Yvonne! Oh, I'm so glad!" she gasped, as the other entered; "wherever are we?"

The French girl shrugged her shoulders. "*Dieu le sait!*" she replied; "you'd better get up, and we'll see if we can find out. Don't make a noise."

Rosalind obeyed, and together they sallied forth on to the gallery, where they turned towards the right, proceeding with utmost caution and glancing apprehensively around them. Every few yards along the inner wall was a door, flanked by windows, apparently giving on to rooms similar to the one they had just left, and their hearts came into their mouths as they passed these, expecting to be pounced upon at any moment.

They had progressed some hundred yards without incident, when suddenly Yvonne stood stock still, listening intently. Rosalind followed suit, and the two looked at one another undecidedly as a low murmur of voices drifted to their ears from farther along the gallery.

"*Allons!*" whispered the French girl at last, determined

to learn something—no matter what—and hand in hand they went on, stopping every few moments to listen. The voices, which obviously emanated from some apartment adjoining the gallery, gradually became louder, but cowardice was not a failing of either of the girls, so they crept steadily nearer and nearer until—

"Why, that's father!" exclaimed Rosalind, and would have run forward excitedly had Yvonne not gripped her arm, muttering a word of warning.

"*Prends garde, chérie!* Who is with him?"

Once more they strained their ears, and then the French girl's grip relaxed, although she remained somewhat undecided. "Monsieur le Colonel," she murmured; "Monsieur Merton, too, I think. It must be all right, and yet—"

"Oh, come on!" exclaimed Rosalind, impatiently; "of course it's all right!"

Yvonne did not say so, but had it not been for the voices of Colonel Mattheson and Alan, she would have held her companion back at any cost until she knew more. It was not that she suspected Sir James of anything underhand, but the Baronet was self-opinionated to the last degree, and, outside business, totally incapable of seeing an inch before his nose.

The gentlemen were sitting in a huge, gloomy apartment, eating. All three looked up apprehensively as the girls passed the window, and then rose to welcome them with evident pleasure.

There was an ominous restraint about the meeting—just a grip of the hand all round, a warmer embrace than usual between father and daughter—and in silence the girls sat down to partake of the food, which was coarse, but plentiful.

The gentlemen were no better informed; they had awakened not long before in exactly similar rooms—the Colonel with Sir James, and Alan with the Reverend Lawson. A casual exploration, in which the latter declined to join, had disclosed this place, where food was apparently going begging, and they had simply appropriated it. Of

the remaining passengers, nothing had been seen, and no one cared to invade the adjoining rooms just yet.

The Baronet was laying down the law, as usual. He had a confused recollection of riding for miles and miles in a litter, which was carried down innumerable steps and dumped in a boat, out of which it was presently hoisted by a crane of some sort. His argument was that their hosts, whoever they might be, were hardly likely to go to so much trouble for people to whom they meant harm, and certainly there was a good deal of reason in that. As for Dr. Radocek, Sir James was far from admitting himself in the wrong ;—the man had simply been driven mad by solitary confinement, following on Captain Netherley's persecution !

Yvone smiled, a little bitterly, but said nothing,—what was the use ? Alan Merton also ignored this amazing explanation of the incident, although he felt pretty sore on the subject, seeing that the airship might have escaped, but for the Baronet's pig-headedness ; however, he did point out that, in spite of the trouble these people appeared to have taken, they were hardly behaving now in the normal manner of hosts.

Sir James retorted with “ Pish ! ” “ Tush ! ” and sundry noises to the same effect, and the argument might have continued indefinitely, had it not been interrupted by several new arrivals,—amongst them Archibald Harris and Dr. Marsh, the Airship’s Medical Officer. Everybody was in the same state of bewildered ignorance, and speculation was rife ; but Colonel Matthieson, Yvonne, and a few others whose dear ones were still missing, were too eagerly watching the door to take much part in the conversation.

Presently, during one of those curious hushes which occasionally fall upon a gathering, the penetrating accents of Harry Grew broke the spell, splintering the silence into a thousand metallic fragments.

“ Wal, Mrs. Matthieson, sounds like someone was here, anyway.—*Come up, Toby !* ” His final remark was snapped out, in striking contrast to the preceding drawl, and every head turned to see what was coming. The Colonel had ears only for the first three words, and he had already

reached the door by the time the Yankee appeared. The latter was supporting Mrs. Matthieson on his left arm, whilst with the other he had the Reverend Tobias Lawson's head in chancery, dragging the half-indignant and wholly terrified man along by main force. Relieved of the good lady, who had caught sight of her husband, Mr. Grew turned all his attention to the unfortunate parson, whom he picked up bodily and dumped none too gently on a chair, with the remark, "Sit right there, Toby! And don't you bat an eyelid, by heck!" Then, turning to the company, he added, "Mornin', everybody!—Sure some parson! He needs a nuss!"

That gentleman remained where he had been deposited, nervously mopping his forehead and gasping at intervals, "Oh!" "Ah!" "Well, I never!" and "Really, you know!" in strict rotation.

"Well, Grew, any news?" asked Sir James, pompously, as the Yankee, with a last glance of contempt at "Toby," sat down to eat.

"I reckon not," was the reply; "fine-combed all the rooms that weren't locked, but there ain't no more guys in 'em. You're sure all here.—'Cept him," he added, nodding towards the Rev. Lawson.

Yvonne and Rosalind looked at one another and glanced away again quickly. They said nothing, but their hands met under the table in mutual sympathy.

The Baronet was more vocal. "But, Grew, where is Lady Harris? She must be somewhere!"

"Maybe," conceded the Yankee, his mouth full, "but she ain't here,—leastways, on-less she's dis-guised as a anti-macassar."

Sir James muttered something inaudible and relapsed into silence, his expression clearly indicating disbelief in the possibility of anyone daring to interfere with his consort. That she might have been killed in the wreck did not occur to him, and, in any case, he would probably have dismissed the idea as "preposterous." As a matter of fact, the poor, faded lady, who never by any chance fulfilled his expectations, had indeed failed him for the last time, having met

her end on those inhospitable hills, where she lay in company with a goodly number of the airship's passengers and crew. Save for the five who had been rescued by the Priests of Isis, and one other, the whole of the "Britain's" survivors were now assembled in this gloomy dining-room,—a bare score in all.

Refreshed by the food, several of the bolder spirits sallied forth again to reconnoitre, although the Yankee assured them they were wasting their time. He was right, for great iron-studded doors, fast shut, barred progress along the gallery at either end of the "free" section, which was perhaps two hundred yards long. By leaning out of the embrasures, it was possible to see that the gallery extended past the door on the left, but the other end was within a few yards of a huge tower, which appeared to form the corner of the building. A sort of lounge next the dining-hall, the dining-hall itself, and all the bedrooms, were provided with doors on the side away from the gallery, but these were fast locked and their massive appearance discouraged any attempt to force them.

Harry Grew was nasally cynical when the exploring party returned with their declaration of failure, and more than one fist itched to test the resilience of his assertive nose. There was no blinking the fact that they were just as much prisoners as if their quarters had been evil-smelling dungeons. Ample space for exercise was at their disposal, certainly, whilst fresh air and a vision of nature at her best could be enjoyed at any point along the gallery, but it was easy to realise that the very perfection of these last would make them pall the sooner.

Meanwhile, for the first and last time in his life, the Rev. Tobias Lawson, who had recovered his poise (Alan spelt it without the "i"), became almost popular. He was the proud possessor of a watch which recorded date as well as time, and, its mechanism having survived the shock, he played the part of oracle with smug complacency. Sir James was decidedly annoyed on being informed that it was now 3.30 p.m. on the 31st of July, but the others were only too glad to have their eager curiosity satisfied to worry about

the irrevocable disappearance of a whole day from their lives.

The Baronet's dignity seemed doomed to suffer. Scarcely had his monologue concerning that "filched" day subsided into semi-audible mutterings, than Rosalind ran to him with the news that there were three niggers in the dining-hall, clearing the tables. Sir James rose majestically and stalked in to question the "niggers," who were, as a matter of fact, rather fine-looking men, light-brown in hue, and possessing distinctly aquiline features. He tried them in his own tongue and then in appalling French, followed by a fantastic imitation of German; after that, he relapsed into ordinary English cuss-words, for not one of the three men had so much as flickered an eyelash. Sir James fairly raved in impotent fury—although he retained sufficient self-control not to attempt violence on those muscular frames,—and the play might have gone on indefinitely had Colonel Matthieson not followed the Baronet in from the "lounge" (whither everyone had repaired) and stabbed the bladder of his wrath by remarking quietly that it was somewhat unreasonable to expect deaf-mutes to pay any attention to his conversation.

Sir James said nothing coherent until he was back in the "lounge"; then he turned on the Colonel and barked indignantly: "Deaf-mutes, are they? Then why the blazes didn't they say so?"

"They are probably Eunuchs, too," added Colonel Matthieson, when the laughter occasioned by the other's remark had died down.

"They may be Esquimaux for aught I care," retorted Sir James; "and what are you all laughing at? I can't see anything funny in being made a fool of."

"Lord help you!" muttered the Colonel, turning away contemptuously.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE PRESUMPTION OF PAUL TCHERKEV

**M**EANWHILE, another conversation of a very different kind was being conducted in a room on the far side of the building, which was, of course, the "fort" seen in the distance by Bob Maconochie and his friends.

Seated round a plain wooden table were four men and two women, a strangely assorted company, and alike only in their facial expression, which was indescribably sinister. At one end was an old man, whose snow-white hair and beard were oddly in keeping with his parchment-like skin and deep yellow robe; his piercing black eyes darted continually from one to the other, as though he would drag their very souls to the surface and vivisect them.

Opposite, and every whit as terrifying in her own way, sat a tall, magnificently formed woman, some thirty years of age. Her skin was white, save for a flush of passion which occasionally stained the velvet cheeks, whilst her silky black hair and sombre eyes could have had no better foil than the purple robe, with its wide border of silver, and the gleaming jewels at her neck and waist. Phorenis, Queen of Nawar, was a woman it were ill to cross, and she was evidently in none too pleasant a humour at the moment, judging from the manner in which her long, shapely hands clenched and unclenched spasmodically on the arms of her chair.

To the right of Phorenis, lounging carelessly in his seat, was an undersized little rat of a man in European dress, white, but with a hint of the East which proclaimed him Russian. Paul Tcherkev, Soviet envoy at Kabul (his title for the outer world's benefit) only belonged in this assembly by reason of that strain of Hell's Essence which was common to them all. In personal courage, tenacity and the honour

of thieves, he was utterly lacking, and the others no more than tolerated him, barely concealing their contempt.

The two remaining men were Hindus, clad in yellow robes similar to the old man's, whilst the second woman was none other than Madame Radocek, looking worn and ill, with a bandage round her head and her arm in a sling. She was evidently struggling to retain her senses, and only the quiet insistence of Nardanus, the bearded old man with the piercing eyes, kept her to the point; or maybe it was the power of his own magnetism which forcibly chained reluctant consciousness to her sorely-tried body.

"Then you cannot tell us why our plans went awry, Madame Radocek?" asked the Queen, tapping her foot impatiently. "You know the god tolerates ignorance no more than failure; your husband has paid the penalty, whilst you . . ." She shrugged her shoulders with ominous significance, and waited.

Madame Radocek cowered, but nevertheless endeavoured to excuse herself. "It was impossible for me to find out, Your Majesty. My husband was arrested without warning, and I never saw him again."

"Why was he arrested?" asked Nardanus.

"I do not know. Presumably they had discovered his part in what was happening to the airship."

"But how?" put in Tcherkev, the Russian; "surely he was a match for these thick-headed English?"

"Again, I do not know. Perhaps the Frenchman put them on the track."

"Monsieur de St. Launeuc?" queried Tcherkev, biting his lip; "yes, you are probably right, but——"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed the Queen, suddenly; "we waste time, Nardanus. What does it matter *how* the fool failed? The *fact* of his failure is all that concerns us, and fortunately some at least of the passengers have been saved for the service of the god."

"Poor specimens, mostly," commented Nardanus, sourly; "the best are either dead or have disappeared. Five men are missing, O Queen, and their dead bodies cannot be found."

" Personally, I am convinced Rames knows something about that," put in Tcherkev; " if I had my way, I'd make an end of his verminous den on Ba-Bel Rock."

Nardanus frowned. " Your views on matters you do not understand are of no interest, Tcherkev. Isis is too strong for us, now as ever. Besides, I do not see how Rames could have had any hand in this affair,—we were too quickly on the spot."

" H'm. If Isis' is so darned almighty, the old girl probably put him up to it," sneered the Russian.

Queen Phorenis peremptorily ordered him to be silent, and turned to Nardanus. " What do you propose ? " she asked ; " shall we kill these people and seize others ? "

" I think not, O Queen ; there is good material amongst them, although, as I have said, the best is gone. The weaklings can be inoculated first, and then, if no use is found for them, they shall be removed. Meanwhile, I intend to keep the whole crew where they are for a few days, in order to bring them to a suitable frame of mind."

" It is well," commented the Queen ; " and the airship ? "

" Useless, unfortunately," replied Nardanus ; " still, money will buy another, if we find it impossible to filch one ; there is no hurry, in any case."

At this point, Madame Radocek recalled the old man's attention to her existence by collapsing in a heap on the floor. He pressed a button and, in response to his summons, an Afghan soldier appeared almost instantaneously in the doorway.

" Remove this carrion ! " commanded Nardanus, curtly, whereupon the man picked up the unconscious form, which he slung effortlessly over his shoulder, departing as silently as he had come.

Phorenis yawned ostentatiously. " Nothing more can be done until the Feast of the New Moon, then ? " she enquired.

The old man shook his head and rose to go, followed by all except Tcherkev, who leaned across to the Queen.

"Your Majesty," he said in a low voice, "may I have the honour of a few moments' private conversation?"

Phorenis hesitated, frowning at the unaccustomed request; then, with a contemptuous shrug, she motioned him to follow, and disappeared through a curtained archway.

The royal lady led Paul Tcherkev, who was conscious of growing trepidation, along interminable narrow corridors, lit by electricity, until they eventually reached her own suite. This was situated at the farther end of the gallery overlooking Lake Nawar, the only means of access to its many rooms being two doors, through one of which they now passed, whilst the other was located in the great gallery itself, from which it shut off about a hundred yards. A good-sized formal garden, open to the sky, occupied the centre of the suite, and it was into this that Phorenis led the shrinking Russian, usually so imperturbable, but now aghast at his own temerity.

The Queen seated herself on a bench built round an old stone fountain, and, motioning Tcherkev to a modern deck-chair in front of her, waited for him to begin.

The Russian moistened his lips nervously and his eyes darted to right and left, looking everywhere but at Phorenis, whose face betrayed cynical amusement at the man's discomfort.

"Your Majesty . . ." he began, in a husky whisper, and then stopped.

"Well?"

"Your Majesty," repeated the Russian, ". . . Your Majesty will forgive me if I presume too far . . ."

"That remains to be seen," she commented, grimly; "go on."

"I—er—well, Your Majesty knows how things stand, and—forgive me, I speak in your own interest—it is undesirable for our cause that there should be any trouble here in Nawar." He paused for an answer, but none came, so he resumed, more calmly now that the ice was broken: "Is it not essential that Nawar should have a king as soon as may be?"

"Indeed," said the Queen, icily, "I fail to see that that is any concern of yours, Paul Tcherkev. Are you proposing to dethrone me, by any chance?"

"Oh, no-no-no-no! Most emphatically not!" exclaimed the Russian, hastily and with evident sincerity; "no king could possibly *replace* Your Majesty, but the greatest Queen needs a consort—and an heir."

"Quite so," replied Phorenis, still more icily; "but you have not explained what all this has to do with you, or rather, what you *imagine* it has to do with you. You are not daring to suggest yourself for the rôle?"

"Well, Your Majesty, I—er—there would be—be—many advantages," stuttered Tcherkev, his forced calm again vanishing in face of the direct question.

The Queen laughed harshly. "I never credited you with courage, Tcherkev," she said, "but I did think you had brains; it seems you have acquired the one and lost the other. Really, I have a mind to hand you over to Set without further ado; but you amuse me; go on."

The Russian's face flushed at her contemptuous gibe, but the sting of it brought back some of his habitual self-confidence.

"My death would avail you nothing," he retorted, "and might make things—er—difficult."

"That sounds ominously like a threat, Paul Tcherkev," interrupted the Queen; "you had better be careful."

"The alliance would be greatly appreciated in Moscow," he murmured, evading a direct answer.

"Indeed, and since when have my domestic affairs been the concern of Moscow? Besides, the Soviet is beholden to me, and not I to the Soviet."

"Quite so, Your Majesty; but to be Mistress of the World—"

"The god will decide that—not Moscow."

"Even gods sometimes make use of men, Your Majesty."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed the Queen, impatiently; "enough of this playing with words! What is your real reason for making this outrageous suggestion?"

Paul Tcherkev suddenly stumbled from his chair and

fell on his knees before her. "Your Majesty—Phorenis—I love you—I worship you, O most beautiful—I—"

"Silence!" commanded the Queen. "How dare you? You—spawn of the gutter—you dare to raise your eyes to Phorenis, Queen of Nawar, and Mistress of the World to be? By Set, it is well that you are an Ambassador here and that I have no intention of quarrelling with Moscow just at present. Go! And go quickly, or I may change my mind!"

The Russian scrambled to his feet, his eyes narrowed and his lips set in a straight line. "Very well, Your Majesty," he said, in a low voice which vibrated with passion, "we shall see. Nardanus may have something to say—"

"You have presumed to discuss this with Nardanus?" broke in the Queen, jumping up furiously and towering over Tcherkev, who flinched in spite of himself.

"Not yet, Your Majesty," he replied, with significant emphasis.

"See that you do not, then, or I will destroy yon carrion in Moscow as speedily as I elevated them. Now go!"

The Russian seemed as if he were about to speak, but thought better of it. He bowed low and, turning on his heel, strode from the royal presence without so much as a backward glance.

His actions on leaving the Queen's suite, which he did *via* the gallery, were peculiar. Walking a short distance along, he entered an apartment not unlike those occupied by the prisoners, but considerably larger and more luxuriously furnished. He shut himself in, carefully drew the curtains, and then crossed over to a table in the far corner of the room, on which stood a small piece of apparatus fitted with an ordinary table-telephone receiver. Picking up a plug, Tcherkev inserted it into a wall-socket, twisted the hand of a dial round several times, put the receiver to his ear and listened. After a few seconds, he apparently heard what he expected, but instead of speaking down the mouthpiece in the ordinary way, he whistled a bar of Tchaikowsky's "Chanson Triste," after which he replaced

the receiver, disconnected the plug, and quitted the apartment.

Proceeding along the gallery a little further, he entered a large salon, furnished almost entirely with easy chairs and divans, which were sumptuously upholstered in pale blue brocade. Sitting down at a piano near the door, he began to play "*Chanson Triste*," following it up with a varied selection of music, some funereal, some gentle, some riotous, but all in a more or less minor key. The man was undoubtedly a magnificent pianist, in spite of the handicap of his short fingers, which were in keeping with his whole physique. An onlooker, who had also witnessed the scene in the garden, might have been forgiven for imagining that Tcherkev was merely playing to relieve his feelings or to soothe his wounded vanity; but there was more in it than that, as was apparent after the music had continued for some twenty minutes. Moreover, the Russian's performance consisted mostly of short pieces, or, when he did venture on a longer one, he stopped frequently and appeared to be listening for something. It came in the middle of Grieg's "*Hochzeitstag auf Troldhaugen*," and, instead of resuming where he had left off, he dropped into "*Chanson Triste*" again. Thereupon a shadow darkened the window, and the next moment a very ill-favoured individual, short and stout, waddled into the room and dropped heavily into a chair.

Vassily Nicolaevitch passed as Tcherkev's servant in this place, as, indeed, he did in Kabul itself and in other towns which his master visited from time to time; nobody ever bothered about him much, in spite of his villainous countenance, since he seemed too unwieldy and conspicuous to be dangerous. It had been the same in Russia some years before, as more than one aristocratic refugee had found to his cost. The rapidity with which Vassily Nicolaevitch could move when he chose was really amazing, while the way he would squeeze his gigantic bulk through an aperture apparently several sizes too small was nothing short of miraculous. Just now, he had been running hard, for perspiration was pouring down the shiny declivity of his

bald head, and he sat gasping for breath, whilst his master played "Chanson Triste" right through, seemingly oblivious of his presence.

"Have you finished the air-pump business?" asked Tcherkev, closing the piano as the final melancholy chord died away.

"Air-pump—business?" queried Nicolaevitch, evidently not understanding, and more than a little scared lest he should have forgotten something of importance.

"Yes, this," replied the other, proceeding to imitate his unfortunate servant's gaspings for breath.

Nicolaevitch grunted. "I'm sorry, Excellency," he managed, struggling to prevent the words sounding like blasts from an exhaust, "but I had to run like blazes across the courtyard to avoid Nardanus, who was prancing down the temple colonnade with a gang of priests; I was afraid of my life lest he should reach the portico before I could get clear."

"Why couldn't you have hid behind a pillar?" asked Tcherkev, whereupon Vassily Nicolaevitch looked ruefully down at his waistcoat and still more dolefully at his "sideways."

His master laughed shortly. "Humbug! You can run all right, and hide all right, when you are in condition. Women and wine are the trouble, and you'll have to drop them for the present."

"Well, you told me to get you information," responded the stout man, defensively, "and . . ."

"That will do!" snapped Tcherkev; "women and wine don't mix with the pious gang up on Ba-Bel Rock, as you very well know, and if you try to pitch me that sort of yarn, it will be the worse for you.—Have you found out what became of the five bodies missing from the airship?"

"Yes, Excellency; they are alive on Ba-Bel Rock. Three are all right, one has a sprained ankle, whilst the fifth broke several bones in the crash."

"Do you know who they are?"

"No, Excellency, beyond the fact that the 'Britain's' Captain and Chief Officer are among them."

Tcherkev grunted in a dissatisfied manner. "And did you find out what happened to Radocek's blasting powder?" he enquired.

"Not for certain, Excellency, but a fair amount of stuff from the airship was taken up to the Rock, so it may have been included."

"H'm. You're a bit of a fool, aren't you, Vassily Nicolaevitch?"

"Yes, Excellency, but I have my points."

"H'm, they're not particularly noticeable," said Tcherkev, drily, with a glance at his servant's figure.—"Well, you don't seem to have accomplished much; have you no other news?"

"Yes, Excellency. That is why I had so little time to find out about these English swine." Vassily Nicolaevitch fumbled in his pockets and produced a wad of papers. "Despatches from Moscow," he explained, briefly.

Tcherkev snatched them with a scowl. "Why didn't you say so before?" he demanded.

"You did not ask me, Excellency," replied the other, plaintively.

"Dolt!" snapped his master; "where's the messenger?"

"In my room at the 'Pomme d'Or,' Excellency."

"Doped?"

"Of course."

"Good. Maybe you're not quite such a fool, Vassily Nicolaevitch."

"Thank you, Excellency; —er—I questioned him."

"Yes?"

"Things are very bad in Moscow. The Soviet won't last much longer, unless Nardanus' pretty little scheme comes off. Nawar would not be a bad place to live in, Excellency, —without Nardanus."

"The Queen does not quite see eye to eye with me, Vassily Nicolaevitch."

The stout man raised that portion of his face where normally eyebrows grow. "No?" he murmured; "that is a detail which could easily be attended to, Excellency."

"Undoubtedly.—Still, power in Moscow is more to be desired than power in Nawar. I will see this messenger myself. Do you go back to him now and I will follow shortly. See that he is able to talk, but see also that he will remember nothing."

Vassily Nicolaevitch hoisted himself upright. "Very good, Excellency," he said, and waddled out of the room without further ado, darkening the window for a moment as he passed.

Tcherkev wandered thoughtfully out on to the gallery, where he remained for some time, gazing abstractedly at the mountains opposite, and still clutching the papers his servant had given him. "That is the plan," he murmured at length, half aloud; "first find out whether there is any chance of seizing the reins in Moscow—that would please Phorenis. And if not, well, power, luxury and a royal wife—or wives (there are some very pretty girls up on the Rock) in Nawar are better than selling boot-laces under the Romanoffs." With that, the Russian's manner changed suddenly and his movements became brisk and decided. He returned to the apartment from which he had telephoned, emerging again in a few minutes, minus the papers, and clad in a long, seedy-looking overcoat, with an equally seedy-looking hat rammed well down over his ears.

Glancing round hurriedly, he dived into the music room, which he quitted by a door on the opposite side, giving on to an open-air garden. This he crossed with quick, nervous strides, afterwards passing through a corridor and emerging into the great central courtyard round which the huge edifice was built. A colonnade, supporting a balcony, encircled this courtyard, and Tcherkev took advantage of the cover afforded by its gigantic pillars to get across without being observed. On reaching the eastern side, he plunged into a maze of gloomy corridors, flanked by hundreds of cubicles wherein slaves were born, spent their days and died, scarcely ever straying beyond the forbidding outer walls of the fort.

Passing the eastern entrance without difficulty, for his

present garb was in keeping with that of the slaves and more-or-less free workmen who normally used it, the Russian found himself in another enormous paved courtyard, reaching from the fort proper to its outer walls. Along the eastern edge of this courtyard were three clusters of tiny stone cottages, of which the left-hand group was inhabited by Indians and Afghans, that in the centre by Mongolians, and the one on the right by Whites; it was here that the "more-or-less" free workmen dwelt, men whom it would have been difficult or impolitic to enslave and whose loyalty had therefore been purchased by giving them some sort of status.

Once beyond the confines of the main building, Tcherkev made no further attempt at concealment, but hurried straight across to the cottages occupied by the whites. Dodging in and out of narrow, evil-smelling alleys, he presently reached a building somewhat larger than the rest, from which came the sound of maudlin singing, interlarded with the growls of half-a-dozen quarrels.

A crude sign over the entrance, bearing the legend, "La Pomme d'Or," proclaimed the place to be a tavern, but even without this, the noise and smell proceeding from within would have betrayed its purpose.

The Russian pushed unceremoniously past the semi-intoxicated loungers round the entrance—men hailing from every land under the sun—and, ignoring their incoherent protests, made his way along narrow, tortuous passages to a room labelled "25." He entered without knocking and found his servant seated at a rough wooden table, whereon stood several bottles which had contained a liquid purporting to be whisky. In one corner, rolled in coarse matting, lay an exceedingly grimy individual with a villainous countenance, mouth wide open, and snoring fit to raise the very stones of the walls from their bed of mortar.

Tcherkev surveyed the unsavoury heap for some moments in grim silence and then turned to Nicolaevitch, who was struggling with the cork of yet another bottle. "He sings very well," said the former, sarcastically, "but I want him

to talk ; you seem to have overdone it again, Vassily Nicolaevitch. When *will* you remember that you yourself are exceptional, and that one cannot pour as much liquor into a pint bottle as into a four-gallon cask ? ”

“ Pah ! ” exclaimed the other, with an airy wave of the hand, “ he’ll talk all right. His head only wants cooling down, that’s all.”

Tcherkev ignored the impertinence and strolled over to the sleeper, on whose grimy forehead he laid a cool palm, albeit with evident distaste, and gazed intently at the man’s closed eyelids. Almost instantaneously the ghastly din ceased, and within a few minutes the courier’s eyes had opened and he was struggling into a sitting posture. Staring uncertainly round the apartment, his bleary eyes finally came to rest on the saturnine countenance of the Soviet Ambassador. He made no sign of recognition, but his figure stiffened as Tcherkev’s gaze seized and held his own, whereat a satisfied smirk spread over the beefy face of Nicolaevitch, who turned once more to the bottle.

“ What is going on in Moscow ? ” asked Tcherkev, quietly, as soon as he felt himself in control of the other’s mind.

“ There is no money,” came the reply, in a dead monotone ; “ peasants are rising everywhere, and rumour has it that the ‘émigrés’ have already seized power on the Roumanian border.”

“ . . . And the Tche-ka ? ”

“ Rotten to the core. If the Romanoffs show any real signs of coming out on top, it will go over in a body.”

“ Is there no possibility of saving the situation ? What do they think in Moscow ? ” prompted Tcherkev.

“ One says this and another says that. Money would do it, but where is money to be obtained ? Nawar will advance no more.”

“ Sale of concessions, perhaps,” suggested his interlocutor.

“ Too slow,” responded the messenger ; “ besides, one hears of reaction in the West—even in England—and the

capitalist swine won't bite ; it isn't worth their while to take the risk."

" But supposing Nardanus' scheme is a success ? "

The courier snorted contemptuously. " If the old fool had done it five years ago, we would already have been masters of the world. Should he succeed now, the result will be merely to place power in the hands of the English Communists, and we shall have to obey their orders, instead of being top-dogs ourselves."

Tcherkev frowned thoughtfully and then fired a question at the messenger with lightning-like rapidity. " How is it that you know so much ? "

" I murdered Palin just before I left," was the dispassionate reply, whereupon his interlocutor smiled in the manner of one whose anticipations have proved correct, and asked the reason.

" I wanted his mistress."

" H'm. Inadequate grounds—very. Did you get her ? "

" No," responded the other, betraying emotion for the first time ; " Muravieff stole her from under my very nose. I tried to remove him, but missed in the dark, and killed her instead."

" You seem to have spent a pleasant evening," commented Tcherkev, grimly ; " what were the Tche-ka doing all this time ? "

" Their chief was arrested and executed for the murders—*'pour encourager les autres'*, the committee said."

The Ambassador shrugged his shoulders. " Well, it's none of my business. You may go to sleep again."

Instantly the messenger collapsed into a heap, and within ten seconds was again making the rafters tremble with the violence of his snore.

" A man after your own heart, Vassily Nicolaevitch," commented Tcherkev.

His servant sniffed disparagingly. " Clumsy, Excellency, clumsy ! Fancy, he killed the woman ! What a waste ! "

The other laughed shortly. " Well, well, there are plenty more.—However, I've no time to waste over this man and his amours ; keep him doped until to-morrow

night and then send him about his business. Meanwhile, get hold of that nigger friend of yours at the Power Station ; we may want to use him before very long."

Without waiting for a reply, Tcherkev quitted the room and hurried back to his own quarters, leaving the stout man deeply engrossed in the serious business of preparing another bottle for its place in the row of empties on the table.

## CHAPTER IX

### RAMES EXPLAINS

**I**T was late in the afternoon when at last Rames entered the apartment where Tony and Peter Brushett lay, still discussing the situation spasmodically with their friends, but unable to come to any conclusion. Myrtis either could not, or would not tell them anything, and Tony, for his part, was content to follow her dainty form with his eyes as she flitted silently about the room. His foot was already well on the way to recovery, and it was evident that the remedies applied were infinitely more effective than anything known to Western civilisation,—so much so that Myrtis had promised he would be able to walk on the morrow.

Rames arrived alone and, beyond enquiring after the health of the invalids, wasted no time in preliminaries, but plunged straight into the eagerly-looked-for explanation.

" You are doubtless wondering what has happened to you," he began ; " well, in order that everything may be clear, it is needful to go back more than two thousand years in the history of Kala-Nawar (or Fort Nawar), which is the name of the great building yonder.

" The Ptolemys were reigning in Egypt, and about the year B.C. 335, according to your reckoning, differences began to develop between Pharaoh and priests of the secret cult of the god, Set, led by a certain Tiphar. Set, in case you do not know, corresponds more or less to the Satan of your Christianity, whilst the moral attributes of Isis, whom we worship here on Ba-Bel Rock, resemble rather those of the Virgin Mary. There is, accordingly, eternal enmity between the two,—that same enmity between good and evil, which has been since the world began, and always will be. You moderns are apt to look upon the Egyptians of old as pagans, idolaters and the like, but God is the same in all ages, under whatever manifestation men worship Him, whereas forms and ceremonies are but ephemeral fancies,

changing with the changing times, varying with race and country. But perchance we may discuss these matters another time ; at present it is of greater moment that you should learn something of Nawar and its inhabitants.

" The exact nature of the differences between Pharaoh and the priests of Set is immaterial. Suffice it to say that Tiphar and his followers met one night in their temple, where they swore before their god, by the oath which may not be broken, to found his worship in another land and never to rest until the whole world bowed the knee before him—whether under the name, Set, or in spirit, mattered not. Men should come to them from the uttermost ends of the earth and study this cult of evil, afterwards returning home to spread the deadly poison in any ways that seemed good to them, striving ever to raise the wicked into the seats of the mighty and to humble the righteous to the dust.

" When all his followers had taken this fearful oath, Tiphar destroyed the building in an hour by secret means, known only to himself, and set forth to establish that new temple which should be the fountain-head of all evil upon earth. He had reckoned without Isis, however, for the Holy Mother appeared in a dream to one Harmuth, then High Priest at a lonely temple in Upper Egypt, and commanded him to be present in spirit at the ceremony of which I have just spoken. Then, when he had learned Tiphar's plans, he should take priests and priestesses of pure Egyptian or Greek descent—for, in those days there were many Greeks who, sickened with the sensual cult of Aphrodite and the rest, bowed the knee to Isis—and follow the worshippers of Set wherever they went, yea, even down to the nethermost pit.

" For many moons Tiphar wandered, Harmuth ever at his heels, across Palestine and Syria, traversing deserts of sand and salt, through ancient Babylon and Seleucia, and thence over the mountains of Persia to the southern shores of the Caspian."

" Did Tiphar know your people were behind him ? " asked Tony.

"Oh, yes, but no votary of Set dare lay hands on a priest of Isis, and to us is violence forbidden. Tiphar tried several times to shake off Harmuth, but the Mother was ever with her champion, and showed him what he should do. In one attempt at escape, the followers of Set took ship to what is now Krasnovodsk, and for a time even Harmuth's faith weakened, for there was no other vessel available; but a great gale arose, and even as he and his priests stood helplessly on the shore, a stout ship was driven for refuge into the bay. Then, when calm came with the night, they took passage aboard her, actually reaching Krasnovodsk before Tiphar, whose vessel had suffered sorely in that same storm.

"Once more they set out on their journey, wandering for many moons across the Black Wilderness and through ancient Merv to the banks of the Oxus, which they followed as far as the confines of modern India. Here Tiphar appears to have heard rumours of some strong place in the heart of the mountains to the south-west, so he turned into Afghanistan (then known as Ariana) which had just been conquered by Alexander of Greece (him whom you call 'the Great'). The strong place was Kala-Nawar, already many centuries old; then, as now, accessible only by a perilous path which leads over the great mountain yonder; then, as now, the habitation of men steeped in evil and learned in the ways of wickedness.

"Tiphar was received as a guest of honour by the reigning King, a white man called Nalus, and it was not long before he had laid bare to this potentate all his plans, promising this, that and the other in return for permission to establish the worship of Set in Nawar. The King consented—with what result, you shall hear presently.

"Meanwhile, Harmuth, on nearing the great mountain, had turned aside into the tunnel you already know, being lured to do so by a false guide, who pretended that thus he would reach Nawar before the others. At that time there was still a certain amount of volcanic activity in this region, and the course of the tunnel was interrupted by a chasm in the heart of the mountain, at the bottom

of which was a seething mass of molten rock. A wooden drawbridge was used for crossing the chasm, but, owing to the fierce heat, this was never left in position; accordingly, the guide had counted upon being able to slip up a subsidiary tunnel to where soldiers of Nawar would be in waiting, ready to cut off Harmuth's band and force them over the brink.

"It had pleased Isis, in her inscrutable wisdom, to permit her priests to be led astray, but she had not abandoned them. Even as they approached the trap, the whole earth rocked and shook with a great noise, and the jaws of the chasm closed, whilst a compensating cleavage swallowed up that subsidiary tunnel where the soldiers waited. Baffled and terrified, the guide had perforce to proceed, since he feared for his life should he tell the truth—not knowing that the priests he led were pledged to do no violence. Eventually Harmuth reached the end of the tunnel and took possession of this rock, on which a ruined temple of some forgotten god already stood. These buildings were also in existence and were occupied by a handful of Pushtaneh (or Afghans) who, believing that men who could pass the fire in the mountains must be gods, made no demur against hauling Harmuth and his priests up in the baskets then in use.

"These natives, together with the men of Lar-Khan (the second village northwards from here), had never submitted to the King of Nawar, who, for some reason unknown to this day, was afraid of them. Consequently, when they learned who the newcomers were, they gave Harmuth every assistance in repairing the temple, which was then dedicated to the service of Isis.

"The oath which Tiphar swore in far-off Egypt was kept to the letter and, throughout the centuries, his descendants, together with those of King Nalus, have been striving to establish the dominion of Set upon earth; but always has it been given to us, the heirs of Harmuth, to undo their evil work—by what means I may not reveal unto you. Often it seemed that Set was at last proving too strong, that the poison his henchmen had instilled

into one nation or another had secured too firm a hold, but our faith never faltered, and Isis showed us the path we should tread.

" Rome became Christian too late, for the men sent from Kala-Nawar had carried out their mission with awful thoroughness, wherefore innocent and guilty were perforce brought to the ground together. So it was with Spain, India, China—we never succeeded in undoing the work of our enemies, but always have we nullified it. The French Revolution was conceived in Nawar, and Napoleon was one of the instruments used by Isis to destroy the evil forces which were then unloosed. Afterwards, *his* life, too, began to be governed, consciously or unconsciously, by the inspiration of Set, and he was brought low in turn. As you are aware, the first beginnings of Napoleon's fall originated in the earthly home of Isis herself, and it was she who guided the fire of the English vessels which sank his flagship '*L'Orient*.' In like manner, his namesake and imitator was hurled from power, and to-day the tool which the Holy Mother used on that occasion itself lies shattered—destroyed from within by the poison of Set, which in the end corrodes that which absorbs it.

" And now, my friends, you have come to us in the midst of the greatest fight of the ages. Hitherto, the priests of Set have made use, partly of single individuals, whom their evil inspiration has thrust into power, and partly of carrion from the gutter—mere underlings, who could do no more than raise men of greater cleverness than themselves. The French Revolution was an exception, but that experiment was premature, for the *canaille* of those days had not the wit to hold what they seized—nor the stamina to support the poison of Set—as you will. To-day, your western education and your western hygiene have changed all that; where in the past only an infinitesimal few were at the same time susceptible to the influence of Set and capable of action, now the ever-increasing numbers of those whose lives are ordered by him threaten the whole of civilisation.

" Everywhere, Jews have been pressed into his service—that race which permeates all the nations of the Occident, that race which has forgotten Jehovah in its feverish search for gold. Karl Marx, although I believe he himself knew it not, drew his inspiration directly from Nawar ; his colleague, Bakunine, was an emissary sent from here by the High Priest of that time for the express purpose of getting hold of the revolutionary organisations in Europe, since subversion of law and order prepares the ground for the evil seed to an extent unattainable by any other means. I do not know where Bakunine hailed from originally, but he came to Nawar as a very young man and proved himself an amazingly apt pupil. Marx was beginning to be discussed rather widely, and, although his ideas were considered by the priests of Set to be crude, he showed such promise that they despatched young Bakunine to secure his brain for themselves. Success attended the man's efforts beyond their wildest expectations, and such was the avidity with which Marx absorbed these deadly doctrines that the lust for power, which is an integral part of them, led him to betray Bakunine to the Russian police, in order to stand alone. One after another, the honest, though misguided men of the movement were dispensed with—Karl Vogt, Lassalle, Proudhon and others—and he attained the god-like eminence for which he had been striving. Poor fool ! He little knew that he was but a puppet in the hands of a power more evil than he ! Poor fools they, who to-day are nourished in the insidious doctrines he preached—believing him to be a saviour, where he was and is a destroyer incarnate.

" All civilisation, built up on godliness, is being undermined by the disciples of Marx—the rank and file following like sheep their leaders, many of whom are fully conscious of the real significance of what they preach. Each struggle is more fierce than the last, for the good are gentle and compassionate ; they have weakly put weapons into the hands of those who would destroy them. Men who acknowledge neither Isis, nor Christ, nor Buddha, nor Mohammed, have arisen—men of blameless lives them-

selves, but without that divine strength which alone can vanquish the evil one.

"Already the greatest Empire of the earth, saving only your own, lies beneath the heel of those who recognise Set as master, and whose every action is governed by their pledge to secure his supremacy throughout the world. In Russia it is not, as in bygone days, a case of men working under blind inspiration, conveyed by mere intermediaries, but of men who are *consciously* hand in glove with the priests of Set in Kala-Nawar, to the royal court of which a Muscovite Ambassador is now accredited."

Rames paused and glanced from one to another of his hearers, smiling slightly as he observed the varying degrees of incredulity betrayed by their faces.

"I perceive you do not believe me," was his comment ; "well, that is hardly surprising, and I do not take umbrage, for my story is unbelievable to you moderns. Monsieur de St. Launeuc, you, I think, are not quite so sceptical ? You know something of Egypt and the East, do you not ? "

The Frenchman nodded. "I want to disbelieve," he said, "but . . . ."

The significant shrug which accompanied this remark was not lost on the others, and again Rames smiled a little as he glanced keenly from face to face before continuing.

"I do not intend to force your belief, my friends—your experiences here will do that—but I do ask you to take my word for the present, and to trust me . . . ."

"We certainly will!" exclaimed Tony, and the remainder nodded assent.

"Thank you ; I felt sure I could count on you to that degree. Now, as I told you, the priests of Set have worked hitherto entirely upon the minds of certain selected men and women, who have then been sent abroad amongst the nations, where they in turn have influenced others. This method possessed the obvious drawback that only those whose minds were inherently receptive could be utilised to further the evil work, thereby enormously limiting the quantity of human material available. Now, however, it is the *body* which is to be attacked. One of

the chief priests over yonder is a Hindu, Kishen Aiyangar—a man learned in what, for want of a better term, I will call ‘black magic’; this man has discovered an actual material poison which so affects the brains of even the best of men that it immediately renders them extraordinarily receptive of every kind of evil influence and, at the same time, incapable of reacting to any godly impulse whatsoever.

“This poison—which, by the way, is injected by means of an ordinary hypodermic syringe—was duly tested, and the question then arose as to the best means of utilising it. Obviously, Russians could be obtained in great numbers, but, for one thing, it is no part of the policy of Nardanus, the present High Priest of Set, to allow Moscow too much power; and, for another thing, Russians are now suspect the world over and could not successfully be employed to subvert other nationalities. Various plans were discussed, and Kishen Aiyangar is even attempting to modify the poison so that it can be introduced into food, thereby rendering it easier to administer and more universal in its application, but fortunately he has not yet succeeded.

“Meanwhile, the British Air Line to India and beyond was started, and the idea was conceived (I believe by the present Queen of Nawar, Phorenis) of seizing one or more of your airships, in order forcibly to inoculate the entire complement of passengers and crew. Naturally, the more prominent the former happened to be, the better for Phorenis’ purpose, and Sir James Harris played straight into her hands by inviting a number of notables to join the ‘Britain’ on its maiden trip.

“Ah, you begin to wonder, I perceive,” continued Rames, whose keen eyes had not missed the change on his hearer’s faces from incredulity to doubt, from doubt to horror and consternation. “Well, I have nearly finished, and then we shall see. The actual capture of the airship was simplicity itself, being effected by an electrical device, which only needed the establishment of a sympathetic current on board to give the operator

at Kala-Nawar entire control ; this, again, was easy, an accomplice being found in the person of Dr. Radocek, whose real name, by the way, is Sivorsky . . . ”

He was interrupted by a gasp from de St. Launeuc, at whom he glanced compassionately.

“ You and your daughter have already suffered under this Sivorsky, is it not so, Monsieur de St. Launeuc ? ”

“ *Mon dieu !* Yes ! ” exclaimed the other. “ I felt sure I had met the man before, and I think my daughter actually recognised him, although she refused to enlighten me. But how is it you know so much about us, mon père ? ”

“ That you must not ask, Monsieur,” replied Rames, shaking his head reprovingly ; “ it is my business to know everything about the emissaries of Set, and I naturally learn something of their enemies and victims at the same time.

“ Well, my friends, as you are aware, the ‘ Britain ’ was brought here, although something went wrong at the last moment and the scheme almost failed. What that something was, I do not know, but perhaps you . . . ”

“ We do,” interrupted Tony, grimly, “ and had Sir James Harris not let this Sivorsky loose on us again, the gentry yonder could have whistled for our airship.”

Rames nodded. “ I thought so,” he remarked ; “ but perhaps it was for the best that things happened as they did, since it may now be possible to destroy the—what did you call them ?—ah, the ‘ gentry yonder ’ once and for all. Had you escaped, other attempts would have been made, possibly with more success, and I see the hand of Isis in what actually occurred.

“ Your airship was wrecked on a sharp ridge in a very peculiar way : The foremost car was cut clean in two, and the front portion remained clinging to the face of the ridge nearest the entrance to our tunnel, whilst the rest became caught in a similar manner on the other side, overlooking the mountain path which leads to Kala Nawar. We were there on the watch, and were able to rescue all those in the front portion—that is, the five of you—before our enemies could reach the pass. I said just now that I saw the hand of Isis in it ; that is not the

whole truth, for I *know*: The previous night, she had warned me in a dream to be at that place with helpers, and to act as my judgment dictated."

"D'ye knew what chanced ta th' folk i' th' after parrt?" asked Bob.

"I fear that many of them are alive, and in Kala-Nawar!"

"My God!" exclaimed the Scot, stark horror in every line of his usually cheerful countenance; "then they may be inoculated by now?"

Rames shook his head in reassurance. "I think not," he replied, slowly; "Nardanus will probably insist upon waiting for the Feast of the New Moon, which takes place in twelve days' time!"

"Thank God!" gasped Bob, fervently, and then paled again as yet another thought struck him. "Hoo are we ta get 'em oot?"

"Isis will show me the way," was the answer, given with the deepest conviction; "everything that has occurred speaks to me of her sure hand, directing the working of a settled plan, and it is possible that you have been sent here to do what we may not—fight. Certainly, there are the Afghans, who are brave enough, but they need leaders acquainted with modern methods, for courage by itself is powerless to remove a single stone from the walls of Nawar. At present, I can *promise* nothing, of course, but if you will place yourselves unreservedly in my hands, accepting without question that which you cannot understand, I am persuaded that we shall be able, not only to rescue your friends, but also to destroy for ever this earthly home of Set."

The old man looked enquiringly at his hearers, and a glow of pleasure lit up his face as the desired assurance was immediately forthcoming from each one of them.

"I thank you," he said, quietly, "and I, for my part, would rather die a thousand deaths than fail you. Rest assured that Isis and her minister never forget those who trust them, even though of a different faith. As for me, my allotted time is drawing to a close, and my spirit warns

me that I shall not live through what is before us ; but if only I can see the final defeat of Set, I shall die content, my life's dream realised. Indeed, I would not wish it otherwise ; to rest at last in the arms of the Mother, her divine commands accomplished and her victory assured—that is a reward which is given to few."

For some moments there was silence, broken at last by de St. Launeuc. "I am desolated, *mon père*," he said, "to think that you, to whom we owe the preservation of our honour, and perhaps even of our very souls, may meet death in the near future. Yet, since you yourself count it a reward, what shall I say ? I, a mere mortal who has faith in his God, without that intimate knowledge and communion which alone can free the mind from earthly conceptions and earthly standards ? But assuredly, *mon père*, I can only say, in all reverence, that you have earned whatever reward you desire."

"Of that, Isis must be judge," responded Rames, "but if her verdict is as generous as yours, Monsieur, then I am indeed well content. And now, my friends, I have one request to make before I leave you for evening worship. When my eyes are closed in the sleep of Isis, my ward, Myrtis, will be alone—for I think that others on Ba-Bel Rock, besides myself, will be with the Mother ere the new moon is far advanced. I would therefore commend Myrtis to your care, in the sure knowledge that she is loyal and true, and that her devoted love will amply repay you."

Was it Tony's imagination, or did the old man's glance rest significantly on him during this speech ? The charge was ostensibly laid on all five of them, and yet—. Tony thought of Rosalind, and bit his lip savagely as a vision of the might-have-been flashed across his mind. He did not really believe that the girl was dead, whom he had nearly married and to whom he remained pledged. Why he should have any conviction at all upon the subject, he did not know, but it certainly could not be that subconscious feeling which springs from the affinity of a mutual love, for such had never existed between them. Nevertheless, Rosalind or no Rosalind, he would do his

part in caring for Myrtis, should the need arise, even though he could never claim the right to relieve the other four of their share of the responsibility.

These thoughts flitted vaguely, formlessly, through his mind as he gave his word with the rest, and almost it seemed that Rames divined something, for when the old man bade them farewell in the Western manner, his free hand rested momentarily on Tony's head, as if in benediction or in understanding sympathy.

For a time, no one spoke save Myrtis herself, who conversed in a low voice with Peter Brushett whilst attending to his needs. Of the others, each was busy with his own thoughts : Bob and de St. Launeuc longed for the time when they should have news of Yvonne, yet dreaded it, in spite of Rames' reassuring words. Jimmie was thinking of his father and mother, and wondering frantically what he should or could do if the diabolical poison already flowed in their veins ere he could rescue them.

It was a striking commentary on the confidence inspired by the aged priest, that the Europeans had now no thought of disbelief, nor, for all their fears, were they in despair. Weak human nature urged that rescue was hopeless, but each man felt in his inner consciousness that Rames was right in saying that Isis—or God, since it was immaterial what one called the omnipresent Spirit of Good—would never allow such disaster to come upon the world, and that they were all instruments in a deliberately conceived plan.

When at last conversation was resumed, it was about trivialities—items of general interest, merely—for no one cared to speak of the graver things when so much was hideously uncertain, when so many ghastly possibilities threatened. Myrtis showed no disinclination to talk of lesser matters, and from her they learned much of the history of Nawar and its people. She herself was of pure Greek descent, as Rames was of pure Egyptian, racial intermarriage being strictly forbidden. The same law applied in Kala-Nawar itself, where Nardanus, the High Priest of Set, was a Greek ; he was, in fact, Myrtis' grandfather, a renegade from the fold of Isis, who had fled from

Ba-Bel Rock forty years before, soon after her mother was born, and had risen to his present eminence by what dark intrigue the gods alone could say. Nobody quite knew from what race the royal house sprang, but it was generally supposed to be Greek; Phorenis was a direct descendant of that King Nalus, who ruled when Tiphar and Harmuth came to Nawar, and as all subsequent royal marriages had been with undoubted Greeks, there could be but little other blood in her veins, if any.

Bob and Tony were naturally very interested in the modern scientific appliances which surrounded them on every hand, and great was their amazement at hearing that electricity had been in regular use for over two hundred years! The aerial ropeway itself was built in 1759, although it had, of course, been reconstructed from time to time as occasion required and knowledge increased. The generating station, which served both Ba-Bel Rock and Kala-Nawar, was run by Afghans, under the control of a Hindu; it owed its origin to a priest of Isis, but continual interference by the followers of Set forced those of the rival cult to come to the present arrangement, which had worked admirably for long years.

Tony questioned Myrtis as to what might have been in Rames' mind when he referred to the possibility of death overtaking many of Ba-Bel's inhabitants, but she did not know, nor would she have said in any case.

"You must not ask these things, Tony," she reproved him, smiling nevertheless; "it is not permitted to any, save only the High Priest himself, to speak to strangers of what is revealed by the Holy Mother."

The girl was moving away from his bedside, but he caught her hand and held it. "Tell me, Myrtis," he asked, "what will you do if some dreadful catastrophe overwhelms all your people, and you have to go away from here?"

"I do not know," was all she said, but the light, which shone for a moment in her eyes as they met his, sent his thoughts leaping, only to drop back again into deepest despair as the remembrance of Rosalind, never very far from his mind, returned in full force to mar that golden moment.

## CHAPTER X

### A POINT OF HONOUR

THE HON. ALAN MERTON was annoyed with himself. For a man who had reached the age of thirty-two and had spent more than a decade in the Diplomatic Service, associating continually with the most beautiful women of society, his heart's inopportune declaration of independence was humiliating. To fall in love was stupid enough, but when the object of his affections was betrothed to another man, and that man a friend, it was positively disreputable. Of course, Tony was probably dead—although Heaven grant it were not so!—but death does not kill love, and Rosalind's devotion had been manifest enough at the interrupted wedding.

Two days had passed by, long days of weary waiting for news which never came, and Alan was sitting in an embrasure of the great stone gallery gazing, unseeingly at the harsh outline of Afghanistan's mountains, silhouetted against the ruddy glory of a tropical sunset. The chilly breath of approaching night already fanned his cheeks, but he was unaware of the passage of time until a voice at his shoulder broke into the futile circle of his thoughts, scattering to the winds annoyance and philosophic determination alike, and setting his heart throbbing painfully.

"Catch cold? No, I don't think so," he managed, in reply to Rosalind's question, the utter banality of the words serving to calm him.

"Well, it isn't worth risking, Mr. Merton," she answered; "besides, we can't afford to lose you, of all people. See, I have brought a rug for you. There's nothing like physical comfort to assist concentration of thought, you know."

"Oh—er—thanks awfully, Miss Harris," he blurted out, whilst she arranged the rug round him, all unconscious of the internal cataclysm the touch of her hands was causing; "but what about you?"

"I have another one, and I'm going to sit in this corner, if you'll permit me. I'll be as quiet as a mouse, because I want to think, too, and a silent neighbour helps." With that, Rosalind ensconced herself opposite him, and for a while they both sat staring straight in front of them.

Alan tried to recapture the current of his thoughts, but failed dismally. To be sure, as the girl had said, one *can* think much better with a silent neighbour at one's side, but it depends upon the neighbour's effect on those parts of one's make-up which habitually flout the processes of reason. Alan attempted to concentrate his mind on that interrupted wedding, but only succeeded in conjuring up the unworthy thought that the ancient architect had made these embrasures too wide. This naturally led to speculation concerning what he would do were the embrasure narrower, whereupon he remembered Tony and mentally kicked himself for a "rotten cad."

Speech seemed safest, even if Rosalind did want to think, and, man-like, he opened the ball with the most dangerous subject.

"I wonder what has happened to poor old Tony and the others," he said, moving slightly, so that he could watch her charming profile.

"Oh, I've been thinking, and thinking," she replied, without looking round; "if only there were someone we could ask! But they must be dead! They must be!"

"Not necessarily," he murmured, insincerely; "after all, what do we know of the accident? Why, *anything* may have happened."

Rosalind turned this time and gazed steadily at him. "You do not really believe that," she stated, quietly.

"N-no, but . . ."

"Then why say it? I am no Victorian Miss. Indeed, I sometimes think it has been for the best.—Though would to God I had been the one to go," she added, passionately; then, with feminine inconsequence, ". . . all those other poor fellows, too!"

Alan hesitated. "Is it permitted to ask what, exactly, —you—mean?" he said, at last.

"No!" was the decisive reply; then, after a pause, "Yes!—Oh, I don't know, Mr. Merton. There are some things of which one *must* speak, and I—I—well, my father is not a man who—who . . ."

" . . . Would understand?"

"Yes. He is a good sort, really, but——. Yet, after all, you are a complete stranger, and I don't know what you will think of me for even mentioning my poor little personal doubts in face of the great tragedy which has overtaken us all."

"Miss Harris," replied Alan, as steadily as he could, "please believe that I consider myself very highly honoured. I do not profess to understand your sex at any time, but it is not difficult to appreciate the desire to share troubles with a friend, and surely I may call myself that? Values change with changing circumstance; ship-board differs from land, whilst a common misfortune, and, above all, imprisonment together, turn years into days and days into minutes. The last thing I would wish would be to urge your confidence, but if I can help, even in so small a rôle as that of a mere listener, then I am entirely at your service."

"Thank you, Mr. Merton.—I believe you are right. According to home standards, we are strangers, and yet there does not seem anything improper, or even surprising, in my speaking to you of matters which are sacred to every woman.—Still, what can I say? After all, there is very little to tell; I have only been thinking what a dreadful mistake my marriage to Tony would have been. He did not love me, but I never knew it until the service on the airship had actually begun."

"Why, what makes you think that?" asked Alan, conscious that, if her surmise were correct, Tony's strange manner throughout the trip was no longer inexplicable.

"I cannot say," she replied, "but I know it just as surely as if he had told me in so many words."

"Then why . . ."

"Why did he ask me to marry him?—Heaven knows!"

It goes without saying that my money had nothing to do with it ; he wasn't that sort. Consequently, I suspect all manner of dreadful things, but my suspicions *are* only suspicions, and as they involve a third party, I must keep them to myself, much as I should like an independent opinion."

Alan nodded. Somehow, she did not seem so much concerned with the fact of Tony's not having loved her as with his reasons for proposing. Did she herself really love the unfortunate skipper, he wondered ; surely, in such case her attitude would have been different ! Love is rarely so altruistic, whatever the poets may say ; and for a girl to be able to speculate on the problematical affections of a dead man when her own love was engaged, would surely not be human.

Greatly daring, Alan ventured the question, his hesitating "And you——?" being spoken in a voice which was hardly recognisable as his own.

It was too dark by now to see the girl's face, but there was an unmistakable catch in her throat as she replied, in a scarcely audible whisper, "I don't know."

Neither spoke for a few seconds ; then Rosalind went on, more to herself than to him ; "I don't know ; that is the hateful truth—far more hateful than if Tony were here. Oh, it seems dreadful, now that he is dead, to say I did not love him, for that is what it *must* mean. I—don't—know ! Could I say that if there were really any doubt, Mr. Merton ? —and yet, I was so sure !"

Alan's heart was beating to suffocation, and he was thankful for the darkness which enveloped them. What could he say, in whose breast a wild hope had been born, who wanted with the whole strength of his soul to believe that she was right, that doubt could not possibly assail her now, had she really loved Tony ?

Several times he opened his lips to speak the words which should declare his agreement, but each time a vision of the skipper's stocky form and genial, open countenance seemed to stand like a sentinel before his eyes. It couldn't be done ; he was biassed, and he owed it to his dead friend to

avoid saying the slightest thing which might prejudice the girl's mind.

"I am afraid I cannot give an independent opinion, Miss Harris," he managed at last, in a suffocated voice, regretting the words as soon as spoken, for surely there was only one construction . . .

Again silence fell, and lasted so long that Alan wondered frantically what his companion was thinking, or if he had given offence. Then, after an age, as it seemed, a whisper came to him out of the darkness, "I was right!"

Stunned, as the full meaning of those three words penetrated his consciousness, and fighting against the leaping hope that was treachery to his friend, Alan sat rigid, aware only that Rosalind had risen and was folding up her rug. Her next words held no hint of the passion which he thought he had detected in her previous remark, and her voice was steady and cool as ever: "The air is damp, Mr. Merton; had you not better come in, too?"

He complied in silence, and together they walked slowly back along the gallery towards where the lights of the dining-hall cast a broad beam across the stone floor and out into the void beyond. Conversation was impossible, for their thoughts were busy with that which was "taboo," whilst dry lips and parched throats cannot utter banalities. The sound of voices came to them distinctly, therefore, as they neared the lounge, when a sharp crack, like a pistol shot, set their already overwrought nerves jangling anew. They covered the last few yards at a run and collided with Yvonne de St. Launeuc, who was sauntering unconcernedly out on to the gallery.

"Who fired that shot?" gasped Rosalind.

Yvonne looked puzzled for a moment and then burst out laughing. "*C'était moi,*" she murmured, at last.

"B-but what's the joke?" asked Alan; in an aggrieved tone.

Yvonne laughed again. It was the first occasion she had as much as smiled since the wreck, but there was a quality of hardness in her voice which suggested hysteria,

rather than genuine amusement. "It—it wasn't a shot," she managed.

"Not a shot?—Then what . . . ?"

"Rosalind, *ma chérie*, your so charming brother tried to kiss me. He is in there, holding his face against a cushion. I am so sorry . . . ?"

"Oh, he deserved it," said Rosalind, contemptuously.

". . . About his being your brother, I mean," amended Yvonne; "I am not sorry I smacked him, only sorry that I missed with the other hand."

Archibald Harris emerged at that moment and pushed surlily past them, without the faintest suggestion of a by-your-leave.

"He ought to apologise," growled Alan; "I've a good mind to . . . ?"

"Oh, let him go," interposed Rosalind; "he's not worth wasting your time. Don't you agree, Yvonne?"

"*Mais assurément, ma chérie.*"

"H'm. I'd like to give him a thundering good hiding, for all that," muttered Alan, as the three passed on into the dining-hall. Here they found their fellow-prisoners in a state of some excitement over a communication which had been laid beside each person's place at table. The letters were all correctly inscribed, and the wording of each was identical:

"You are hereby commanded to be present at the  
"Court of Her Majesty, Phorenis, Queen of Nawar,  
"on Sunday, August the Fifth, at 4 p.m. precisely.

(Signed) "Jamnadas Neewanjee,  
"Captain of the Guard  
" (for the High Chamberlain)."

Sir James, who had been surprisingly unobtrusive for the past twenty-four hours, quite recovered his normal manner on reading this communication, and when Alan and the two girls entered, he was impressing on all and sundry that he had been right from the start.

"You see, Colonel," he was saying, "this command is

a clear indication that we are honoured guests, and I am convinced there is nothing to fear. Besides, I think I may say I am accustomed to dealing with—er, no—*consorting* with crowned heads, and I am confident in my ability to meet any situation whatsoever. However, there will *be* no situation, because it is in the highest degree improbable that this—er—native Queen will dare to insult ladies and gentlemen of our standing, even should she wish to do so, and our—er—treatment hitherto is proof that she does *not* wish it. Are my deductions not correct ? ”

“ I hope so,” growled the Colonel.

“ Pshaw, man ! It’s plain as a pikestaff ! What do *you* think, Archie ?—Not that it matters what you think.”

Archibald, who had just entered, one cheek red and the other white, was understood to remark that this Phœnix was probably more of a lady than some he had met.

“ That’s *very* likely,” commented Rosalind, *sotto voce*.

“ Well, you will see that I am right,” insisted Sir James.

“ I hope so,” reiterated the Colonel, every hair of whose bristling moustache quivered with scepticism, whilst the set of his eyebrows, the tilt of his chin and the firmly planted feet—all said even more plainly than if the words had been spoken, “ You’re a damned fool, sir ! ”

The Baronet stood his ground against that military glare for no more than an instant and then sat down to eat his dinner, whereafter noises indicative of impatience became mingled curiously with others of purely physical origin.

## CHAPTER XI

### PHORENIS, THE QUEEN

A VAST hall, nearly six hundred feet long by a hundred wide, its gilded roof supported by huge marble columns, its walls panelled with costly woods framed in gold, its floor a marble pavement heavily worn by the feet of countless generations—such was the throne-room of Kala-Nawar, into which the Europeans were ushered through a magnificent curved colonnade, leading from the spacious open courtyard around which the fortress was built.

The Captain of the Guard himself, a stalwart Hindu, escorted them, but except for the soldiers stationed on every hand, who might or might not have been specially placed for their benefit, there was no outward indication that they were prisoners. Armed men stood motionless between the great pillars which formed a colonnade round the hall itself, whilst groups of officers, nobles and priests were scattered at random about the vast space in the centre. At the far end, between two massive pylons, hung a tremendous purple curtain, glittering with interwoven gold, and before it stood two sentries with drawn swords, their whole attitude one of tense alertness.

All eyes were turned towards the Europeans as Jamnadas Neewanjee ushered them in through the great portico, directing them to a fairly clear space on the right of the hall, about half-way along. Having disposed of his charges, he saluted and strode over to the sentries, whom he personally relieved, drawing his sword and taking up his stand a few paces in front of the curtain. The whole interior was bathed in the soft white light of shaded electric globes, which, whilst contrasting oddly with the barbaric splendour of both edifice and company, yet did not seem out of place. Gold and jewels sparkled and scintillated again, silks shimmered and arms flashed, as men and

women—white, yellow and brown—moved here and there, the groups continually breaking up and reforming like patterns in a giant kaleidoscope. Some were gay and some grave, but the eyes of one and all returned time and again to the Europeans in their sombre raiment—flitting curiously from anxious face to anxious face, some with amusement, some with contempt, and some—a very few—with sympathy.

Sir James, with characteristic arrogance, had planted himself at the head, whilst Colonel Matthieson stood near him, more with a view to heading the Baronet away from possible trouble than himself taking the lead. On Sir James' other hand was Alan, whilst close beside the latter stood Rosalind and Yvonne.

The French girl was surprised and annoyed to find, soon after entering the hall, that her customary sang froid had entirely vanished and that her whole body was trembling, as if with cold. She drew her cloak closer round her shoulders, but without effect, and having elicited from Rosalind the opinion that the hall was uncomfortably hot, began to fear that some form of fever was about to add to her already heavy burden. Yet her head was clear enough, and although she was loath to attribute the trembling to fright, no other explanation really seemed to fit.

Suddenly, Rosalind gripped her arm and pointed to a group to the left of the curtain. "Yvonne," she whispered, "do you see that horrible man over there? Why on earth is he staring at you like that?"

Yvonne looked in the direction indicated and immediately found her eyes held by those of a slim man, of medium height, whose skin and features proclaimed him a Hindu,—presumably also a priest, since he wore the yellow robe which seemed to be the sacerdotal dress of Nawar. It was all she could do to prevent herself walking towards him, and once their eyes had met, every effort to avert her gaze was vain; the trembling had ceased, however, having apparently been induced by the concentration of the priest's regard, which was so intense as to cause actual physical discomfort.

What would have been the outcome, had Alan not chanced to move his athletic form between them, it is difficult to say, for Yvonne's power of resistance was already weakening, and release came not a moment too soon. For the moment, her physical relief was so great that she was content to accept the respite without questioning its permanence or trying to fathom the reason for this man's extraordinary interest in her. With Rosalind, as an onlooker, matters were different, and a new terror had been added to those already threatening them—sensed, rather than the result of definite knowledge ; cautiously, she looked round the hall to see if anyone were regarding her in the same way, for the meaning of the incident had been borne in upon her whilst Yvonne was still unaware of the priest's existence.

Suddenly, the silvery tones of a trumpet echoed and re-echoed across the vast throne room as a door opposite them was flung wide and a procession of priests entered, headed by Nardanus. The newcomers ranged themselves on either side of the curtain, and again the trumpet sounded, followed by the opening bars of a barbaric march, played by a modern military band hidden away somewhere out of sight.

Simultaneously, the purple and gold curtain parted in the middle and swung back to either side, disclosing a large alcove, whose walls were a mass of gold and jewels, blazing under the light from clusters of electric lamps nestling amongst the delicate tracery of its arched roof. In the centre of the alcove, seated on a magnificently-wrought golden throne, was Phorenis, Queen of Nawar, a regal figure in purple and silver, with a plain circlet of gold on the glistening mass of her black hair.

Jamnadas Neewanjee swung round when the second trumpet sounded, kissed the hilt of his sword and mounted the steps of the throne, where he took up his stand on the Queen's left. On either side of Phorenis were smaller chairs, also of gold, and in these, after making obeisance, Nardanus and the priest who had betrayed so much interest in Yvonne seated themselves. Meanwhile, the rest of the

assembly remained prostrate, whilst the Europeans, impressed in spite of themselves, bowed low in Western fashion ; was it imagination, or did a cynical smile hover on Phorenis' lips as she noticed the salutation ? Colonel Matthieson thought so, and, turning to remark on it to Alan, was surprised to see the latter standing as if transfixed, gazing intently at the Queen.

" Hullo ! What's the matter with you ? " he whispered.

Alan took not the slightest notice, and the Colonel was about to repeat his question, when Phorenis raised her hand, the trumpet sounded again and the assembled multitude seated themselves on the ground.

For some moments there was a tense and impressive silence ; then the Queen spoke, slowly and distinctly, in English :

" Nardanus, you have somewhat of moment to report, is it not so ? "

The High Priest rose and, making a deep obeisance, replied in the same language, " O Queen, live for ever ! There are present here in the glorious light of the Queen's countenance a score of men and women from the West, who came to her dominions in a ship of the air to spy out the land . . . " A slight gasp of astonishment came from the Europeans at this statement, but none of them quite knew what to say, and the old man continued without other interruption, " . . . Their ship of the air was wrecked near the great mountain, O Queen, and we, your faithful servants, were enabled by the intervention of Set to capture all save those who died."

" How know you, O Nardanus, that these people are spies ? " asked Phorenis.

" O Queen, they are all of that mighty Empire of Britain, whose language we now speak, and whose citizens desire to bring under the sway of their sovereign all the nations of the earth ; yea, even unto the very little ones. It is enough for them to see a land, to covet it, and I therefore claim these men and women for the glory of Set, O Queen, since, if they be not spies by intent, they have nevertheless beheld the Queen's dominions and coveted them."

"I have heard, O Nardanus, but to covet our dominions is not necessarily to possess them," retorted Phorenis, in a tone which implied that the High Priest was not acquitting himself to her satisfaction.

"True, O Queen," conceded Nardanus, flushing angrily, "but the Queen's eyes have beheld their ship of the air, and who can fight against such an engine of war, however strong be his walls?"

Phorenis laughed harshly. "So! It is even as I warned you, O Nardanus, when you spoke to me of the men who flew, ere ever they came to Nawar. We, who are learned in the science of the West, have allowed ourselves to be outstripped under your guidance."

"I did not believe the ships of the air could cross the mountains, O Queen," muttered the High Priest, almost inaudibly.

"It would seem, then, that Set has turned his face from you," was the royal comment.

"Give me the spies, O Queen," replied Nardanus, quickly, "and Set shall again protect Nawar, yea, even against the ships of the air."

Phorenis smiled grimly and turned to the Europeans. She addressed herself to Sir James, but it was not lost on Colonel Matthieson that her eyes strayed ever and anon to Alan, and that a distinct softening of her expression was noticeable each time this happened. He would have given anything to distract the young man's gaze, which was still riveted on the Queen in diabolical fascination, but too many people were looking in their direction. Rosalind had seen it, too, and her heart was heavy with dread at what this new complication might portend, both for herself and for them all.

"You have heard, O Englishmen," observed Phorenis, curtly; "what have you to say?"

Sir James, whatever his failings, was not deficient in courage, and the others could not withhold admiration at the defiance in his words, even whilst regretting his lack of diplomacy. "Your Majesty," he replied, "I say that Mr. Nardanus is a liar!"

"Sacrilege, O Queen!" exclaimed the High Priest, "I demand . . ."

"Silence!" ordered Phorenis, evidently enjoying the old man's discomfiture; then, turning to Sir James, she said, sternly: "You have called the High Priest of Set a liar, O rash one; prove it."

The Baronet unhesitatingly explained who they were and gave a full account of what had happened to the airship, concluding by expressing the opinion that "Mr. Nardanus" knew more about it than he pretended.

"Indeed," commented the Queen, "and why should our High Priest wish to bring your airship here, even had he the power?"

"Presumably the scoundrel wanted to steal it, Your Majesty," replied Sir James, uncomfortably conscious that, if these people really knew nothing of the matter, his story must sound uncommonly thin.

Nardanus jumped up angrily. "O Queen, I demand satisfaction," he roared; "this man has called me a liar and a thief, and he must be handed over to Set immediately."

"'Must', Nardanus? 'Must'!" said Phorenis, icily; "that is not a word to which I am accustomed."

"It must be, O Queen, if we are to avert the vengeance of Set," amended the High Priest, hastily.

"It is well," said Phorenis. "Englishman, I do not believe your story. Set claims those who vilify his priests, and out of your own mouth are you condemned. You must die—you and all your company."

"Indeed, Your Majesty," retorted Sir James, "and may I ask by what right you judge us,—citizens, as yonder scarecrow said, of a mighty Empire?"

The Queen's face darkened. "By what right?" she rapped out; "you are insolent, O Englishman. I am monarch here, and *that* is my right."

"Pardon, Your Majesty," interposed Colonel Matthieson, quietly, "but we are in Afghanistan, are we not?"

"You are in Nawar," replied Phorenis, evasively.

"Nawar is nevertheless in Afghanistan," insisted the Colonel.

"Well, what of it?"

"Afghanistan is a country at peace with ours, Your Majesty, and we know of no ruler save the Amir."

"The Amir is powerless here," replied Phorenis.

"That is immaterial, Your Majesty," countered the Colonel; "he is officially recognised as sovereign of all Afghanistan, and as such, we demand the right of appeal to him."

The Queen laughed mirthlessly. "Demand, by all means," she scoffed, "and much good may it do you! There is a saying in your language that 'possession is nine points of the law'; hear it, and learn!"

"Your Majesty," interrupted Sir James, "if you think our deaths would not be avenged, you are mistaken. I promise you that a fleet of airships shall come to this place with bombs—of which, since you know so much about us, you have doubtless heard—and not one stone shall be left upon another."

"It seems we may well run the risk," replied Phorenis, "since your accursed race, having discovered our dominions, will surely find some excuse to lay them waste, even if we spare you."

"Your Majesty is misinformed," said the Colonel, quietly; "such is not our practice, and if yonder High Priest has told you anything to the contrary, he lies."

"Indeed," replied Phorenis, "then how is it that your Empire is so vast? Was it, perchance, the ways of peace which brought you such great possessions?"

"Some of them, Your Majesty. Others we conquered, but that was in the past, and we no longer make war on our neighbours."

"Altruism incarnate," commented the Queen, sarcastically. "Enough! I am determined to have no spies here, and if you have nothing more than children's tales to put forward, hold your peace!" Then, addressing the Hindu priest on her left, who had all this time been endeavouring to recapture the gaze of Yvonne, but without success, she asked, "Have you aught to say touching this

matter, O Kishen Aiyangar—you who know the ways of these English?"

The Hindu rose to his feet and, salaaming profoundly, began to speak in a thin, reedy voice, "O Queen, live for ever! The Queen's justice is infallible, and the spies have indeed deserved death, but I would nevertheless crave their lives, for I would use them in the interests of science. The Queen knows that I have discovered a preparation which destroys memory for a period determinable by the quantity administered. I would experiment upon these spies, and if success is accorded to me, then there will be no danger in setting them free, for they will remember nothing of their experiences."

"But why should we set them free, O Kishen Aiyangar?" asked Phorenis.

"O Queen, he who said there was danger in killing them spoke truth. They are citizens of a great Empire, which knows how to protect its own; whereas, if my request be granted, Nawar remains a secret from the outer world, and therefore safe."

"And if you fail?"

"I shall not fail, O Queen, but if I do, then the sentence of justice can be carried out."

"It is well," said Phorenis. "What think you, O Nardanus?"

Angry protests might have been expected from the High Priest, but he showed no sign of annoyance, merely murmuring, "It is well, O Queen."

"What if we refuse, Your Majesty?" asked Sir James.

"Your consent is unnecessary," retorted the Queen, "but perchance some shall be spared. I have a mind that yonder fair giant shall not be polluted with Kishen Aiyangar's poisons. With these words, she suddenly leaned forward, and an unholly light blazed from her wonderful eyes as she concentrated them with indescribable intensity on Alan Merton.

A hush fell on all that glittering assembly as, tense and expectant, they watched to see what would happen. For a moment it seemed that Alan thought to resist the royal

will ; his hands clenched, the veins stood out on his forehead and his whole body swayed stiffly to and fro. Then slowly, hesitatingly, he began to move. An agonised cry of "Alan !" burst from Rosalind, who caught desperately at the tail of his coat, but he wrenched himself free with almost savage impatience and, once beyond her reach, walked steadily across the hall to kneel at the feet of Phorenis.

A smile of triumph on her lips, the Queen extended a hand for him to kiss ; then, in obedience to a sign from her, he rose to his feet and, mounting the steps, stood at her right hand. There he remained, as if in a trance, throughout what followed, his good-looking face expressionless, one hand hanging limply at his side and the other resting lightly on the arm of the throne.

Rosalind, after that one vain attempt to interfere, stood as if frozen to stone, and had it not been for the horror and despair which showed plainly on her face, marring its dainty contours, one would have thought that she, too, were under the deadly hypnotic influence which pulsed and throbbed through the heated atmosphere, eloquent of the unholy alliance between civilisation and barbarism which governed this house of devilry.

White to the lips, the little group of Europeans drew closer together, glancing askance at one another, the unspoken question, "Who next ?" in their eyes. A slight stir near Sir James attracted instant attention, and Yvonne was seen to step hesitatingly forward, hands outstretched, as if sleep-walking. With a growl like an angry tiger, Colonel Matthieson snatched at the girl's slight form and crushed it to his breast, despite her struggles, whilst two steely-grey eyes glared defiance from under his bushy brows at the sinister countenance of Kishen Aiyangar, who was crouching, tense and eager, in the golden chair by the throne.

Who would have won the encounter is doubtful, but even as the protagonists redoubled their efforts, a diversion occurred in front of the alcove, and Yvonne's body relaxed in the Colonel's arms, freed for the moment from the influence of the Hindu's will. An undersized man in

European dress had suddenly appeared from behind a gigantic pillar and rushed towards the throne, where he flung himself on his knees before Phorenis and raised his arms in supplication.

"What is the meaning of this clown's performance, Paul Tcherkev?" demanded the Queen, icily.

"Your Majesty," cried the Russian, "for the sake of our cause, I pray you command this mummery to cease! We are in grave peril, and these childish pastimes do but add to it. Spare that man"—pointing to Alan—"and we are undone! O Queen, hearken unto my warning . . ."

"Enough, Paul Tcherkev!" blazed Phorenis, springing to her feet; "how dare you question my actions? You forget you are but an ambassador here, and I have only to lift my finger . . ."

"I forget nothing, Your Majesty," interrupted the Russian; "I only remember that our cause is endangered, and I would speak, even though Set himself were to say me nay."

"Blasphemy, O Queen!" shouted Nardanus, jumping up in his turn; "he must die!"

"'Must' again!" exclaimed Phorenis, turning on the High Priest; "methinks you have as little regard for your skin as this poor earthworm here. Hearken, both of you! I am Queen of Nawar, and as Overlord I recognise only Set. It is my will to marry the man I have chosen, and he shall be your King! Down on your knees, Nardanus, and render homage to him, or, by Set, I will also choose me another High Priest from amongst these Englishmen, who, in truth, please me well."

The old man flung up his arms, as if to exorcise the madness which had come upon Queen Phorenis, and then obeyed the royal command, taking Alan's unresisting hand in his own and muttering inaudibly over it. As for Paul Tcherkev, he writhed on the pavement in impotent fury, whilst some of those near, who either knew or surmised his real motives, smiled meaningly at one another and cast looks of hatred and contempt in his direction.

For some moments the Queen remained standing,

towering over the two men and tasting to the full the sweets of her triumph, although by no means unmindful of the risks she ran and of the mutterings amongst certain of the nobles, who resented the elevation of a newcomer—and a spy at that. Alan, for his part, seemed utterly unconscious of what was going on, and it was clear, even to the scandalised Sir James, that he was not responsible for his actions.

At last Phorenis was satisfied and resumed her seat, motioning the prostrate men to rise. This they did with some alacrity, Nardanus returning to his place and Tcherkev slinking away out of sight—none knew whither, nor cared. No sooner had his shuffling footsteps died away behind the great columns, than the Queen proceeded to give further proof that nothing escaped her ever-watchful eyes, and Kishen Aiyangar was haled before the throne.

"By what right," demanded Phorenis, "do you dare to exercise your powers in my presence without permission?"

"My powers, O Queen?" murmured the Hindu, blandly.

"Do not bandy words, priest!" snapped Phorenis. "Think you that I am blind—I, who see all and know all?"

"The Queen promised that some should be spared," replied Kishen Aiyangar, evasively, abandoning his attempt at bluff.

"The Queen will spare those whom it pleases the Queen, and not those whom it pleases Kishen Aiyangar," she stated, "remember, O priest, and remembering, take care! Now go to your place!"

"It is well, O Queen," muttered the Hindu, and, with a last glance towards Yvonne, sulkily resumed his seat.

Phorenis smiled cynically and addressed herself once more to Sir James. "Have you still a mind to refuse the mercy offered you?" she asked.

"I do refuse, Your Majesty," retorted the Baronet, "and a thousand devil's tricks will not move me!"

"There spoke a man," commented the Queen; "but I tell you, O rash one, that the Laws of the Medes and Persians were not as unalterable as the lightest word of Phorenis of Nawar. I command; it is for others to obey."

"Very good, Your Majesty, we shall see."

"Without doubt, we shall see many things, O Englishman, and that right soon.—Nardanus, what is in your mind touching this experiment of Kishen Aiyangar?"

"The Feast of the New Moon is celebrated eight days from now, O Queen, and since the spies are to taste of the glories of Set, it were well that they be initiated then."

"It is well," replied Phorenis; "see to it that all is in readiness, and, meanwhile, remember that their minds and bodies are inviolate until I decree otherwise. Is there aught else?"

"There is, O Queen," said Nardanus, slowly. "The priests of Set are pledged to his service, are they not?"

"What of it, O Nardanus?"

"This, O Queen: Yonder Kishen Aiyangar—who, though sprung from a race alien to our god, was granted the high honour of priesthood in his service—has betrayed the trust, in that he has looked upon mortal flesh, not of our faith, with lascivious eyes."

"True, O Nardanus, and you should indeed know, who are learned in the arts of lasciviousness," replied Phorenis, cynically.

"Knowledge is needful for the exercise of my high office," said Nardanus, scowling at the gibe.

"And so is experience, it would seem," came the caustic comment.

"The Queen is pleased to jest," remarked Nardanus, sourly, "but the Queen has placed our safety in the hands of this Hindu, and his temptation is great, for yonder maid is fair and comely; if she be spared, then is all our work vain. Therefore I say, this is no jest. The temptation must be removed."

The tolerant smile disappeared from Phorenis' face as he said this, to be replaced by a frown of anger. "Thrice have you used the word 'must'; have a care that I do not command that Nardanus 'must' die."

"Pardon, O Queen!" cried the High Priest hurriedly. "It is that I am not so instructed in this speech of the

English as the Queen, who herself commanded its use before the spies."

"It is well," responded Phorenis, somewhat mollified, "but see to it that in your learning you despise not little words, for they are potent, like the fire which consumes a human body committed to it.—Now, touching this temptation of which you speak, what is in your mind?"

"The maid should die, O Queen."

"That cannot be, for I, Phorenis, have given my royal word that these spies shall be inviolate until the Feast of the New Moon, she with the rest."

"Then, O Queen, shall the maid not be pledged to the service of Set here on earth, that the Hindu may break no vows? Shall she not be confined alone in a cell of the temple until the Feast of the New Moon, when the matter may be further spoken of?"

"It is well," agreed Phorenis, signing to the Captain of the Guard. "Take her away."

Jamnadas Neewanjee, looking as if he had but little liking for the task, approached Yvonne, accompanied by two of his men and a priest.

Their way was barred by the burly form of Colonel Matthieson, who planted himself firmly in front of the girl. "By God! You shall not!" he shouted, whilst Sir James and several other man ranged themselves round. Archibald and the Reverend Lawson found that one of the columns impeded their movements, so neither was included in the gallant circle which glared defiance at the unfortunate Captain of the Guard, who paused and turned uncertainly towards the Queen for instructions.

Even she hesitated in face of this impudent flouting of her authority by unarmed men, but her indecision lasted only a moment. "Jamnadas Neewanjee, you have your orders. Carry them out!—Englishmen, my word is pledged that you come to no harm until the Feast of the New Moon, eight days hence, and that pledge shelters also her whom you seek to protect; but should my guards be compelled to use force, mere words—even those of a Queen—cannot save you from your own folly."

"The mem-sahib will be safe," muttered the Captain of the Guard; "I myself will watch Kishen Aiyangar, the priest."

Further argument was prevented by Yvonne herself, who cut the Gordian knot by slipping through the ranks of her champions.

"I go with you, Monsieur le capitaine," she said, quietly; "it is not right that my friends endanger themselves for me."

"No, no, Yvonne!" cried Rosalind, trying to push through in her turn, but without success.

"Have no fear, *ma chérie*," replied the French girl, calmly; "the good God will protect me.—*Au revoir!*"

"I don't like it," growled the Colonel, worried and perplexed, but half-inclined to trust the Hindu officer, whose face lacked the look of cunning so noticeable amongst the majority of these people.

"But certainly, Monsieur le colonel, neither do I!" laughed Yvonne, albeit rather shakily; "but what do you English say? 'Needs must when the devil drives.'—*Au revoir, mes amis.*" With that, she placed herself bodily between the soldiers, and the party marched off, the priest in front and Jamnadas Neewanjee bringing up the rear.

Colonel Matthieson made as if to start after them, but Sir James pulled him back. "She's quite right, Colonel," he muttered; "we can do nothing now, and our chance may come later."

"True," admitted the other, "but I don't like it, all the same."

A peremptory order for silence put an end to conversation for the time being, and, in the hush that followed, Nardanus rose and walked with stately tread to a point some ten yards in front of the Queen, where he turned and prostrated himself to the ground. Phorenis raised her right hand, stretching it towards the recumbent priest, who immediately rose to his feet and stood rigid, whilst one by one the lights went out, until the vast hall was in darkness, save for a single bluish lamp, hanging half-way between Nardanus and the throne.

Then from the great entrance arose the strains of a dirge-like chant, and parallel columns of priests and priestesses advanced across the marble pavement, swinging censers and filling the hall with a greenish haze, the odour of which was pleasantly sweet at first, without being sickly. By the time the procession came level with the statue-like form of Nardanus, however, the atmosphere was so thick that the smarting eyes of the onlookers had great difficulty in distinguishing anything at all.

As soon as the foremost files reached the pylons flanking the alcove, those in the rear closed up and ranged themselves on either side, making a sort of corridor from Nardanus to the throne, where the Queen sat motionless, the rigid figures of Alan and Kishen Aiyangar on either side of her. There was profound stillness for fully a minute, disturbed only by the faint hiss of the burning incense, an indescribably sinister sound, which seemed to the excited imaginations of the Europeans to speak of depths of evil so infinite that the mind of man could not plumb them.

So interminable and oppressive was the hissing silence that Rosalind and the other women of the party could only keep themselves from screaming by summoning to their aid every atom of will-power they possessed, and even Colonel Matthieson found himself clenching his teeth and driving his nails into the palms of his hands. A slithering sound and a slight thud from the colonnade behind announced that somebody had fainted, but the noise of the fall was partly smothered by the voice of Nardanus, who had begun to chant in some unknown tongue. Softly at first, and then ever louder, until the words boomed and echoed again through that vast space, the High Priest chanted on for what seemed an eternity, finishing at last in a bull-like roar.

Scarcely had his voice died away than the assembled priests and priestesses took up the refrain, repeating it word for word in the same awe-inspiring crescendo, so that the final stanzas burst forth like the crash of artillery, shattering the wreathing haze of incense, whilst the

whole atmosphere vibrated and shook with intolerable sound.

Even more unbearable was the deathly silence that followed, and straining ears were waiting for the chant to recommence, longing for the first minor notes, yet dreading them. The ordeal was not repeated, however, for Nardanus began to gabble unintelligibly in a monotonous voice, the dreary flow of words being punctuated at intervals by a single monosyllable, shouted in unison by priests and priestesses.

This ceremony concluded, Nardanus moved for the first time, raising his arms in front of him by almost imperceptible degrees until they were at right-angles to his body. There was dead silence whilst his arms paused and grew rigid; then the greenish haze between him and the alcove began to stir, becoming ever more dense as it swirled faster and faster, until it formed a huge twisting column, exactly like a waterspout in shape and colouring, reaching up to and beyond the single blue lamp overhead.

Once more Nardanus began to chant as the light dimmed and disappeared in the whirling smoke, and thereupon priests and priestesses prostrated themselves to the ground. A lurid red glow appeared in the lower part of the column, starting as a tiny point of light and gradually extending downwards until it formed a rough oval. For a moment it remained so, and then almost imperceptibly began to resolve itself into a human shape, glowing ever more brightly as the outline became sharper, whilst the red colour faded through deep rose to light pink, finally disappearing altogether. By this time, every detail of the figure was clearly defined, despite the surrounding smoke; it was that of a woman in early life, nude, and surpassingly beautiful in form and feature, whilst a cascade of shimmering dark hair descended over the snowy breasts. Even Colonel Matthieson, staid and elderly Colonel Matthieson, could not repress a spontaneous gasp of admiration, oblivious of the Victorian nastiness which brought a muttered "Most improper!" from Sir James.

The vision was speaking now, in clear, bell-like tones,

pulsing with some emotion which might have been anger ; the language used was incomprehensible to the majority of the Europeans, and although one or two recognised it as Greek, it was not until afterwards that they were able to piece together what had been said. Nardanus appeared to be asking numerous questions, the replies to which were evidently little to his liking, and the brow of Phorenis, which gleamed ghastly in the light reflected from the vision, was lowering, her lips ominously set and her hands clenched.

Finally, the woman raised her right arm on high and delivered a lengthy oration, of which every word fell distinctly on the ears of the listeners, solemnly and slowly, like the tolling of a funeral bell. A shudder of dread sighed round the great hall as she spoke, whilst Phorenis almost cowered in her seat, and the outstretched arms of the High Priest shook perceptibly, as if with ague.

The voice of the vision ceased and her form grew indistinct as a swirling column of smoke once more veiled it, wreathing ever faster and more densely, until at length the figure disappeared. Simultaneously, the fiery glow returned, starting as a faint pink tinge in the haze, deepening to rose and finally developing into a lurid red, which gradually extended until the whole twisting pillar was ablaze with the dreadful glare, lighting up every nook and cranny of the vast hall.

Save for the motionless figures of Nardanus and the three in the alcove, *the place was empty !* Not a vestige remained of priests or priestesses, nobles or courtiers, soldiers or slaves !—All had vanished, save those four and the Europeans, who stood, silent and cowed with sheer, stark terror.

But what was this ?—The fiery pillar seemed to be spreading. The alcove was completely hidden now behind its awful glare, and the wreathing haze seemed to be twisting itself into demoniac faces, which grimaced at them with a fiendish glee, whilst devil's laughter echoed and re-echoed through the nothingness of space, shattering the very air itself. The figure of Nardanus, arms still

outstretched, expanded and grew, terrifying alike in its immobility and its giant grotesqueness, whilst the ever-increasing girth of that awful column of fire touched and enveloped him in its hellish embrace.

Human endurance could bear no more. Shrieks from the women, akin to madness, mingled with the surrounding pandemonium of mirthless laughter. One after another they fainted, dropping unregarded to the floor. Some of the men buried their faces in their hands, whilst the lips of the Colonel—who still stood, firm as a rock—moved in silent prayer.

The gargantuan figure of the High Priest grew ever bigger and bigger . . .

## CHAPTER XII

### PHORENIS, THE WOMAN

SLOWLY, painfully, the Hon. Alan Merton dragged himself from the bottomless depths of a stupor-like sleep, peopled with fantastic demons and beautiful women, who danced around him—now with laughter and song, now with shrieks of defiance and contempt, now with threatening fury and angry gestures—whilst beyond their clustering heads he could see the lovely, agonised face of Rosalind, struggling frantically to reach him, her lips soundlessly forming his name.

Wearily he opened his eyes and stared vacantly for some minutes at the ceiling, whose white smoothness brought a sense of peace and relief after the kaleidoscopic phantasmagoria of his dream. Daylight streamed in through the windows, and when he at last summoned strength to sit up, Alan found himself in his own bed, surrounded by the stillness of an ordinary morning. How long he had slept, he could not tell, nor could he remember when unconsciousness first overcame him. Of the scene in the Throne Room he had but a vague recollection—a confused medley of persons and incidents in no way related. He remembered the darkly beautiful Queen summoning him, and he saw himself standing by her side through many eternities—or so it seemed—but the purpose of it all was veiled in mystery.

By Jove ! The Queen had said something about marrying him ! Could he have gone through some wedding-ceremony in his trance, or whatever it was ?—The effect of the thought was electrical : Alan bounded out of bed and made a hasty toilet, bent on ascertaining with the least possible delay whether he were still a bachelor or not. Of course, the idea was preposterous ; but then, nothing seemed to be impossible to the extraordinary inhabitants of this amazing place.

The gallery was deserted when he emerged, and a gentle breeze wafted in through the embrasures, caressing his burning face and bringing freshness, where before he had felt stale and flaccid. Even the necessity of determining his status was relegated to the background for the moment, and he rested his elbows on the stone ledge of an embrasure, taking big draughts of the clean, wholesome air, and feasting his tired eyes on the rugged honesty of the great mountain range beyond the lake.

At length he regretfully turned his back on the peaceful scene, and was making for the dining-hall when he came face to face with Rosalind.

"Alan!" she gasped, a flood of colour, no less than the use of his Christian name, betraying her secret in the unexpectedness of the encounter.

Alan himself was speechless; he had unconsciously counted on seeing some of the men before being confronted with her who had dominated his thoughts, sleeping and waking, since their conversation in the embrasure some nights before.

Her face whitened at his silence, and she was about to turn away when Alan threw discretion to the winds and, seizing both her hands, drew her to him. Their lips met, and for a while neither spoke, each content with the joy of the moment, and careless who might be near.

Alan was the first to break the spell, though his arms still held her as in a vice; all that was holy seemed to be embodied in her—she was his one anchor against this devil-queen who had tried to imprison his soul, for so he regarded what had happened.

"My dear!" he whispered; "My dear!"

Rosalind's arms were round his neck, her face close to his, as she answered, brokenly, "Oh, Alan!—That dreadful woman! I thought you were lost!—Why did you go to her?"

"Couldn't help it, Rosalind; I suppose she must have hypnotised me. But what happened afterwards? I remember standing by her side for ages—she spoke of marriage . . ."

"I know."

"Did she—I mean—was that all?"

"I don't quite understand."

"Rosalind, sweetheart, did it—stop at that? I cannot remember. The most awful thought came to me on waking, that she might have married me in my trance!"

The girl's cheeks blanched. "My God! I never thought of that!—Alan, she shall not have you, even if she did! I don't care! I *won't* let you go!"

Rosalind kissed him passionately, and for a brief space he gave himself over to her caresses, but conscience and the ideals of a lifetime would not be denied for long; this matter had to be sifted to the bottom.

"Then *you* don't know what happened?" he asked.

"No. I remember nothing after the spirit raised by Nardanus disappeared. Everything seemed to go all red, he became a giant, and then I fainted."

"Yes. I have a vague recollection of that myself," said Alan, slowly, "but the rest is a blank.—Anyhow, I was a bachelor up till then," he added, grinning, in spite of his anxiety, as the absurdity of the remark struck him.

Rosalind nodded. "Perhaps some of the men can tell you?" she suggested; "I have only just woken up, so haven't seen anybody yet."

Accordingly they went along to the dining hall, but found it empty, although the tables were laid as usual.

"We'd better eat, anyhow," said Alan, and they sat down together in silence, not daring to put into words the thoughts which filled their minds.

Presently, a shadow fell on the window and, to their very great joy and relief, Colonel Matthieson entered with his wife, whilst after a time the others drifted in by ones and twos, as if nothing had happened. Some of them—particularly Sir James—looked rather askance at Alan, but nobody felt particularly inclined to tackle him, and the fact that Rosalind still recognised his existence was sufficient for the majority.

Talk was pretty general on the events of the previous

afternoon—the date was verified by the Reverend Lawson—but it was soon evident that no one knew what had transpired after Nardanus' amazing performance. The general view was that some form of gas had been administered to them, and colour was certainly lent to this theory by the fact that everyone else had left the hall except the chief actors in the drama, who might conceivably have rendered themselves immune in some way.

The "Britain's" Medical Officer, Dr. Marsh, a quiet, unobtrusive individual, found himself for once the centre of interest, for he was the only man who really understood much of what the vision had said. The language was ancient Greek, but spoken with a pronunciation very different from that taught nowadays, and many of the sentences were unintelligible, not only to him, but to one or two of the others who had also succeeded in getting on the track. The gist of the vision's prophecy seemed to have been that the victory of Isis was at hand, that Nardanus and all his works were doomed, and that the whole of Nawar would "disappear in flame and smoke" from off the face of the earth.

"Sure some programme!" commented Harry Grew; "I guess it's me for the lake, in that case. And who'n hell's Isis?"

"Well," replied the Doctor, "I suppose the Egyptian goddess, Isis, was meant, but heaven knows where she comes into it. For that matter, Set was an Egyptian deity, too."

"But what the tarnation thunder are those guys doin' here? This ain't Egypt."

"How on earth should I know?" said Dr. Marsh, irritably; "the whole thing's a most preposterous jumble of anachronistic imbecility."

"Help!" exclaimed the Yankee, subsiding incontinently into a chair.

"What was the incantation all about?" asked Colonel Matthieson; "did you get that?"

"No," replied the Doctor; "it wasn't Greek, and I haven't the faintest idea *what* it was. Ancient Egyptian,

perhaps, though certainly neither Nardanus nor Phorenis springs from that race. Then that fellow, Tcherkev, who had a row with the Queen, was unquestionably Russian."

"That's where the Bolsheviks come in, I suppose," commented the Colonel.

"Shouldn't be surprised," admitted Marsh, "but how—Lord knows! Phorenis spoke of his being an ambassador, so it looks as if there's some connection."

"But what is the Amir of Afghanistan doing to permit all this?" grumbled Sir James.

"My dear sir," retorted the Doctor, "I don't suppose he knows any more about this circus than we did. Not that he could, or would, do much in any case."

"Disgraceful!" snapped Sir James; "I shall write to the papers about it."

"That *will* be helpful," muttered the Colonel, in an audible aside, which the Baronet luckily did not hear, for at that moment Jamnadas Neewanjee entered with a couple of guards and walked across to Alan, whom he saluted in Western fashion.

"Her Most Illustrious Majesty, Phorenis, Queen of Nawar, commands the sahib's presence," he said, curtly.

"What for?" asked Alan, whilst Rosalind's face became white and drawn, and the others held their breath in suspense.

"The Queen commands," replied the Captain of the Guard; "she explains not."

"Supposing I refuse to go?"

"I should not like to use force, and I beg that the sahib will not compel me to do so," was the significant reply.

Alan shrugged his shoulders. "Then there's evidently nothing for it," he said, rising from the table.

Rosalind caught his hand. "Don't go!" she entreated, although she knew he must.

Alan gently released her grip and, leaning across the table, whispered, "At least I shall hear whether I'm married or not, you know. Au revoir, darling."

Sir James was looking on disapprovingly from the other side of the room, annoyed because he did not know what it was all about, and distinctly puzzled by the interest his daughter seemed to be taking in "a mere acquaintance." The incident passed unnoticed by the others, who were listening eagerly to a catechism of Jamnadas Neewanjee by the Colonel. The latter wanted to know what had become of Yvonne, and was by no means reassured to learn that she was confined in a priestess' cell.

The Captain of the Guard was reticent, but not unkindly. "Mem-sahib is perfectly safe," he reiterated; "the Queen will not break her word, and I will keep watch on Kishen Aiyangar, as I promised."

"But what will happen to her after this Feast of the New Moon?" asked the Colonel.

"I know not, sahib," answered Jamnadas Neewanjee; "but her whereabouts meanwhile will not affect her ultimate fate, one way or the other. In fact, she is safer in the cell of a priestess, for that is sanctuary, which not even Kishen Aiyangar will dare to violate.—And, I must ask the Colonel-sahib to excuse me, for the Queen's business brooks no delay."

Jamnadas Neewanjee saluted and turned to Alan. "Will the sahib give parole?" he asked.

Alan gave the desired assurance, whereupon the Hindu dismissed the two soldiers and personally escorted him through the iron-studded door which ordinarily blocked further progress along the great gallery to the left.

In spite of a very natural anxiety, Alan kept his eyes open as they walked, carefully noting the topography of the place with a view to future use if opportunity arose.

Beyond the door, the gallery curved inwards to conform with the cliff's edge, and presently the wall of the building itself was interrupted for some forty yards by a row of magnificent marble columns. Behind these was a huge ballroom, extending right through to the central courtyard and flanked by open-air gardens, to which pillared porticos gave access.

Then came what appeared to be a music room, and

beyond it, a row of living apartments, similar to those occupied by the prisoners.

Passing through the iron-studded door which barred access to the stretch of gallery fronting the royal suite, they turned aside down a short corridor, and so into the formal garden, where Phorenis awaited their arrival.

She was seated on the stone bench by the fountain, looking singularly lovely in a robe of white, embroidered with pale lemon, and there was something in her strange beauty which made Alan, who, after all, was only human, catch his breath.

Jamnadas Neewanjee, having ushered him into the royal presence, salaamed profoundly and disappeared through another exit, leaving the two alone—much to Alan's discomfort.

He bowed and waited for Phorenis to speak, but as she made no sign, he ventured, in a low voice, "Your Majesty sent for me?"

The Queen smiled graciously and motioned him to sit beside her, half turning in order to see his face. "What is your name, O Englishman?" she asked, and, when he told her, repeated it after him with faultless enunciation.

Meanwhile, Alan was already conscious that the same sense of subjection to a stronger will was stealing over him as had been his undoing on the previous afternoon. This time he struggled hard to retain control over himself, and with some success, but he knew he was fighting a losing battle, and that it was only a matter of minutes ere his mind and body would be at the entire disposal of this devil-queen, for so he thought of her; but as her influence increased, his conviction of her essential evil waned and vanished, and he saw only lovely woman, who for some unknown reason wanted him—and, by heaven! He wanted her!

"Oh, Alan Merton, I would make you my King," she said softly, leaning towards him.

"Phorenis!" came his answering whisper, the scent of her hair in his nostrils as it caressed his cheek driving from him all thought save the delirium of her presence.

His arms went round her, and slowly she lifted her face to his, but ere their lips met, footsteps sounded in the garden, and Rosalind's voice, crying, "Alan!" pierced the clouds in his brain, shattering delusion and letting in the pure white light of sanity.

He started away from the Queen as from a deadly serpent, and simultaneously she sprang to her feet, her lovely face contorted with demoniac rage.

Less than two minutes after Alan had left the dining hall in company with Jamnadas Neewanjee, and whilst those who remained were still debating the incident, the door opened again suddenly, this time to admit Paul Tcherkev.

The Russian glanced hastily around, and his face darkened as he noticed Alan's absence.

"Has the Captain of the Guard been here this morning?" he asked, abruptly.

It was Rosalind who told him what had just occurred, and he looked at her keenly for a moment before replying, "Then if you would save your lover from that she-devil, come with me—quickly!"

The girl rose, but before she could take a single step forward, Sir James interposed himself rudely between them. "Her lover? What do you mean, sir?" he bawled; "I know nothing of this. Why should she go with you?"

Tcherkev shrugged his shoulders. "That is for the lady to consider," he suggested, quietly, "but she must decide at once, or it will be too late."

Meanwhile, Rosalind had slipped round a table and reached the Russian's side. "I have decided," she stated, with splendid defiance of the angry Baronet; "lead on, M. Tcherkev. I am ready."

They were across the room before Sir James had recovered from his stupefaction at the scandalous conduct of his usually docile daughter, and he was still stuttering incoherently when the door closed behind them.

Following the same route as the others, the Russian, who

had long ago acquired keys in ways best known to himself, led her to the Queen's garden, where they arrived just in time to avert the consummation of that unholy embrace.

Rosalind, satisfied for the moment with the effect of her cry, stood silent and waited for the storm to burst, but the Queen's rage was so great that, for once, the power of speech failed her.

Paul Tcherkev's cynical smile seemed a fixture. He had burned his boats now, and was fully prepared to betray his cause and, if necessary, wade through a sea of blood to win this Phorenis, who at present held him in such bitter contempt. Seeing that she could not speak, he availed himself of the opportunity to have his say before the guards haled him off to a dungeon, as would inevitably be the case.

"O Queen, live for ever!" he began, ironically; "Is it a royal privilege to sunder lovers and steal the betrothed of another woman? Love does not mate with blood, O Queen, nor will the Soviet permit its cause to be imperilled by a union between its glorious ally and a man of the hated race of the Western Isles."

Phorenis found her tongue ere Paul Tcherkev could say more, and the words poured forth in a rushing torrent. Her remarks were fortunately unintelligible to Rosalind and Alan, since she spoke in Russian, but there was no mistaking their general import, which was abuse of the most un-royal description. Then she turned on Rosalind, and reverted to English:

"As for you, kitchen-wench, how dare you invade my privacy? What if this man is your lover? Am I not the Queen, and shall I not take whom I choose, to make or break as I will? By Set, had I not given my royal word that you—with the rest—should be inviolate until the Feast of the New Moon, I would slay you as you stand. But the Queen is not mocked; I'll have no kitchen-wench polluting the arms of him whom I have chosen, and you shall eat out your heart in the dungeons of despair beneath yonder mountains, whilst your lover's head rests content on my breast."

She clapped her hands, and instantly guards appeared from a door behind her, advancing on the four of them—Phorenis standing at bay like a magnificent tigress ; Paul Tcherkev facing her, no whit dismayed ; Rosalind and Alan, a little to one side, hand in hand, and waiting for the end.

The Queen turned her head for a moment towards the soldiers, and in that instant, the Russian sprang to Alan's side, pressed something into his free hand and whispered, " Wear this, and fear nothing ! " It was all done in a flash and Tcherkev was back in his former position, still smiling blandly, when Phorenis again looked round. The guards, if they had noticed the by-play, made no sign. Why should they ? It was not their business to draw the Queen's attention to her own carelessness.

She gave a curt order, and instantly Tcherkev and Rosalind were surrounded, Alan being torn from the latter by main force when he endeavoured to interfere. He knew the uselessness of appealing to Phorenis, so there was now nothing for it but to trust in her word that no harm should come to the girl yet ; judging from experience, the Queen would not break it, but his heart ached at the agonised expression on Rosalind's face, for he knew what she must be thinking.

What had the Russian meant just now ? Alan looked up and, seeing that Phorenis was watching the departing prisoners, glanced at the thing which had been put into his hand. It was just a small black pendant, in the form of a scarab, on a thin metal chain ; reflecting that, after all, no harm could come of following Tcherkev's advice, he hastily slipped it over his head, and down inside his collar. The Queen turned whilst he was still fingering his throat, but apparently she noticed nothing, for her anger had vanished, and the serene smile of content which reigned in place of the contortions of rage did not waver.

Once more she seated herself on the stone bench and beckoned Alan to her side, but, much to his own astonishment, he did not move.

"Come, my Alan," she murmured, with that in her voice which was almost pleading.

"I am sorry, Your Majesty," he replied, coolly, "but it is impossible."

The smile waned, but human passion, when it grips a woman such as this, withstands many rebuffs, and Phorenis did a thing of which she would have thought herself incapable. Rising from the bench, she walked slowly towards Alan, fell on her knees before him, and, taking his hand in hers, rested her cheek against it.

He quivered slightly at the contact, but his will remained under perfect control, and he lifted her gently to her feet.

"It is not right, Your Majesty," he murmured; "I am already pledged. The Queen is the most beautiful of women, and that a man should love her is no miracle; but the Queen does not break her word—and neither will I."

Alan had spoken soft words more from motives of policy than anything else, although he felt that an outburst of fury was inevitable. To his amazement, however, nothing of the kind happened. Phorenis stood looking at him for quite a minute; then, without a word of warning, placed her hands on his shoulders and kissed him full on the lips. The next moment, she had flung herself full-length on the bench and burst into a passion of sobs which shook her whole frame.

Alan stood undecided. Armed with Tcherkev's talisman—for it must have been that to which he owed his immunity—he felt that he could deal with the Queen's fury or her love-making, but this—! Cautiously, he laid his hand on her shoulder, but she shook herself free.

"Go!" she said, in a choking voice, between sobs; "Go! Go!"

Regretfully, and somewhat sadly, Alan obeyed. Of course, Phorenis deserved no sympathy, for she was evil through and through, but no man can look unmoved upon a woman who is breaking her heart for love of him, especially if she be young and beautiful. And *was* this Queen so utterly bad?—At least, she had honour of a sort, for she would not break her word. Perhaps it was wrong

to make excuses for her, but Alan found himself doing so, nevertheless. He could not forget that kiss, in spite of his love being irrevocably given to Rosalind, who was now suffering for him in some God-forsaken dungeon, fully believing, doubtless, that he was already in the Queen's arms, mind and body in hopeless subjection to the royal will.

Musing thus, he had reached the first of the great doors in the gallery before it occurred to him to wonder how he was to get through, but a guard appeared, as if from nowhere, and escorted him back to the far end without so much as asking a single question.

Then, whilst he was still marvelling at the ease of his escape, a familiar voice came to his ears, its harsh, dictatorial accents immediately banishing every thought save one: He would have to explain about Rosalind to Sir James!

## CHAPTER XIII

### PAUL TCHERKEV PLANS REVENGE

THE soldiers made no attempt to prevent conversation between Paul Tcherkev and Rosalind as the two were escorted along an interminable series of winding passagés towards whatever was in store for them. Two Afghans marched in front and two behind, the prisoners side by side in the middle—an arrangement which might have made escape down one of the many side corridors easy, had Rosalind known where these led. If the Russian knew, he made no sign, and indeed, it was no part of his plans to become a refugee, either within or without the fort.

For the first quarter-of-a-mile, the party proceeded in silence, Rosalind wondering miserably what Alan was doing—although not for an instant suspecting him of voluntarily making love to Phorenis. Tcherkev, on the other hand, was quite happy, for he had effectually spiked the Queen's guns—unless Alan Merton proved a fool, which he did not expect—and the intrigue upon which his crooked mind was now busy was of a kind entirely congenial.

"What do you think will happen now, M. Tcherkev?" ventured Rosalind, at last, wearied of thinking in hopeless circles and eager to talk to somebody, even to so unpleasant a specimen as this Russian.

He gave a caustic chuckle. "If you mean the little love-affair back yonder, my dear, that is a thing of the past."

The girl with difficulty repressed an inclination to shrink aside at the familiar "my dear"; nothing was to be gained by irritating the man, whose interests were obviously identical with hers, whatever his motives. "How do you mean?" she asked; "would Queen Phorenis throw Mr. Merton into gaol also?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear; she's in love—badly. But

I gave your friend a certain scarab to hang round his neck, and as long as he wears it, Phorenis cannot hypnotise him. No doubt she has tried already—and failed."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Rosalind.

"Certainly, if you like," commented the Russian, "though I don't see what He has to do with it."

"Thank you, too," she added, ignoring the blasphemous gibe.

Tcherkev chuckled again. "You need not bother," he said; "I did it to suit myself. Frankly, I don't care a damn what happens to either of you, except in so far as you are useful to me."

Rosalind was not to be denied, however; her relief was too great, and demanded vocal expression. "For that matter, I don't care a damn *why* you did it," she retorted; "I am deeply grateful anyway."

The Russian looked at her in some surprise and smiled with unaccustomed geniality. "Well said, my dear! I believe I'm quite glad I helped you.—And I don't mind telling you that I intend to use your friends again to further my plans. If we succeed, you will all be able to get away from here, and if we don't—well, you won't be any worse off than now."

"Glad to hear it," commented Rosalind, in the same careless tone; "and until then, I suppose I live on bread and water in a nice, damp cell?"

"Something like it," he admitted; "nothing can happen till the Feast of the New Moon, a week from to-day. It won't be bread and water, though, because Phorenis would consider that a breach of her promise."

"She's not *all* bad, then?"

"No, that's the trouble," he replied, cryptically, and relapsed into silence.

Her mind more at rest, Rosalind looked about her as they walked, and shivered involuntarily on observing that the walls of the passage were now of solid rock. Evidently they had left the fort and were in the heart of the mountains which towered over its southern extremity. Would they ever escape? It seemed madness to encourage the hope.

Suddenly a challenge rang out in front, and the little party halted abruptly whilst the leading soldiers parleyed with a sentry. Then a Hindu officer emerged from a small chamber on the left and gave some orders, as a result of which the prisoners were handed over to his own men, the guards who had accompanied them so far returning the way they had come.

The officer himself led the party onwards along passages which twisted and turned bewilderingly, deep into the bowels of the mountain, whilst innumerable openings to right and left indicated the existence of an intricate labyrinth, from which escape would be utterly impossible without a guide.

At long last, Rosalind found herself deposited in one of a row of tiny cells, excavated from the rock wall of a subsidiary tunnel. The only means of ventilation was a narrow grating in the iron door giving on to the passage, the air of which was, however, comparatively fresh. Light was provided by a small electric burner in the ceiling, and the stone ledge which did duty for a bed was furnished with mattress and blankets, so that Phorenis clearly did not intend her to suffer the barbarian rigours which one automatically conjured up on seeing the approach to this dreadful place.

Meanwhile, the officer had taken Paul Tcherkev to a similar cell farther on, and was about to depart when the Russian detained him.

"I wish to see the Captain of the Guard, Jamnadas Neewanjee," he said, in English.

"He no come," replied the officer, brusquely.

"Oh yes he will," retorted Tcherkev, detaching a small, beautifully-chased golden ball from his watch-chain; "send him this immediately, and see that you fail not." He passed over the charm, together with a few coins, which the man pocketed and, with a curt, "I send it," left the cell, locking the door securely behind him.

As soon as the Hindu's back was turned, Tcherkev drew a tablet from his pocket and began to write rapidly, pausing every now and then to refer to a tiny, but compre-

hensive plan which he had extracted from a wallet attached to the pad.

He was still occupied in this manner when Jamnadas Neewanjee arrived, outwardly imperturbable as ever, but inwardly a prey to considerable agitation, as his twitching fingers and an occasional narrowing of the eyes showed.

"I received the symbol," he said, curtly.

"Good! The hour has come, Jamnadas Neewanjee," responded Tcherkev, with equal brevity.

"So I divined. What do you want me to do?"

The Russian went on writing for some minutes before replying. Then, laying down the pencil, he gave his whole attention to the soldier, who was standing like a ramrod, just inside the door. "First," he said, "you will give orders for my servant to be brought here at once; then, whilst he is on the way, we can discuss other necessary arrangements."

The Captain of the Guard made no reply until he had given the desired commands to a soldier stationed outside in the tunnel; then he returned to his former position, with the remark, "It is done."

"Very well. The position is this, Jamnadas Neewanjee: On the night of the Feast of the New Moon, certain persons will require to penetrate into Kala-Nawar. They will be disguised as slaves, and you will arrange that men who can be trusted not to ask questions are on duty at the mouth of the Power-Station tunnel, the eastern entrance of the fort, and also at the approach to these dungeons. At the same time, there must be a password as usual, so as to lull possible suspicion; has it been issued yet?"

"It is 'Thoth,'" replied the Hindu.

Tcherkev nodded, and made a note on his tablet. "Goddess of the Moon," he commented, drily; "most appropriate, but rather incongruous, seeing that the subjects of Phorenis are supposed to be worshippers of Set.—H'm. You don't know what I am talking about, do you?"

"No," was the answer, almost rude in its abruptness,

for the Captain of the Guard, although he accepted Tcherkev's leadership in order to further his own ends, despised the Russian and, whilst doing his best to disguise the fact, could never bring himself to utter the word "sahib."

Tcherkev himself had no use for mere courtesy, and he was not even aware of the Hindu's omission, but others had noticed it, and the Russian consequently fell even lower in their estimation.

Meanwhile, he was issuing further orders : "Armed with the password, then, the persons to whom I referred will be admitted at the eastern entrance. You need not trouble about the outer walls, as the party will come via the tunnel from the power station, and my servant will make all arrangements with the officer in charge there. Inside the fort, a guide will be unnecessary, since they will be provided with a plan and with any further information needed for finding their way about. They will come here first, in order to release myself and the English lady, for which purpose you must hand me duplicate keys to-day. I shall then take charge, and they will act under my instructions. You will arrange for the guard to advise you immediately the party enters the fort, and you will further see that, as far as possible, your own mercenaries are on duty in the temple. You must, of course, ensure that my servant is free to come and go as he pleases, both at the eastern entrance and here."

"It is well," said Jamnadas Neewanjee ; "but who are these people of whom you speak ? There may be fighting, and the votaries of Isis do not fight."

"I do not know that it concerns you," was the tart reply, "but, since you ask, they are those men from the airship who were not found by Nardanus. You see, I know a good deal more than anyone else in the fort, so take care."

"I shall not fail," responded the Hindu, with obvious resentment at Tcherkev's implied mistrust.

"I hope not ! Now go, procure the duplicate keys of these dungeons, and come back as soon as you have word of my servant, bringing them with you."

Within a quarter-of-an-hour, Jamnadas Neewanjee returned, accompanied by Vassily Nicolaevitch, and handed over two keys to Tcherkev, who nodded approval. "You may go now," said the latter, "but leave one of your men to guide my servant out of this infernal hole."

Jamnadas Neewanjee inclined his head and departed, whilst the two Russians remained silent until he was safely out of earshot.

"One never knows," muttered Tcherkev, significantly, dropping into Russian; "now, Vassily Nicolaevitch, you must go to-night to Ba-Bel Rock, where you will seek an interview with Rames. Take this letter . . ." —folding up what he had written, and enclosing the plan—" . . . guard it with your life and see that you give it into no other hands. Wait on Ba-Bel Rock for the answer as long as may be necessary, and bring it straight here to me."—Tcherkev then folded up a second letter, which he also gave to his servant.—"Deliver this to the officer in charge of the power station, on your way back from Ba-Bel Rock, provided Rames' answer is 'Yes.' The Captain of the Guard will provide you with a pass for entering and leaving the fort."

"What about the keys, Excellency?" asked Nicolaevitch.

"Here they are; give them to Rames with the letter, which explains everything. Now go, and see that you fail in no particular whatsoever."

Vassily Nicolaevitch stowed the letter and keys carefully away in an inner pocket and called to the waiting soldier, who immediately let him out and re-locked the door behind him. As soon as they were gone, Paul Tcherkev lay back on the hard bed and gave himself over to anticipation of the sweets of victory.

So Phorenis, the Queen, thought to treat him as a thing of no account, a target for her bitter contempt. Well, Phorenis, the Queen, should learn in the very near future that this thing of no account was master and would rule, not only Nawar, but her also. The Russian smiled cruelly, licking his lips in dreadful anticipation. He was in

love with this woman, as far as it was in him to love at all—mere animal passion, perhaps, though none the less potent for that—but power meant almost as much to him as the satisfaction of his desires. He intended to possess Phorenis, but first he would tame her, and, in the taming, she should come to love him. If she did not, well, her beautiful body would be his, and as for her soul (presuming it existed), she could keep it to amuse the children.

How he loved to see the mighty ones of the earth dance to his piping ! How he had revelled in that untold agony on the faces of the hated aristocrats of Russia as, stripped of name, home, possessions, and even clothing, their women-folk were given to his men for playthings, and their men-folk for target-practice ! Oh, it was good to be alive, and master ! To see riches and take them, to hate a superior and slay him, to covet a princess and possess her ! Almost he regretted having come to this unenlightened land, where desire was by no means identical with possession ; and yet, and yet—surely Phorenis would prove worth all the trouble he was taking ! To tame her proud spirit, to make her his willing slave—suppliant for the favours of a man she had publicly flouted—that were a task worthy of his mettle, an achievement greater even than any of the deeds accomplished by his prophets, Lenin and Trotsky ! *They* had no barbarian Queen to deal with ; *their* victories were won over gently-nurtured women, softened by centuries of civilisation ; but *he* would triumph over Phorenis the great, Phorenis the beautiful, Phorenis the infinitely passionate !

Lost in contemplation of the sordid triumph and ignoble joys that were to be his, Paul Tcherkev drifted off into a dream-disturbed slumber, wherein he vainly sought the glorious beauty of Phorenis, only to be confronted at every turn with the face of another woman, divine and serenely lovely, upon whose head rested the Uræus of ancient Egypt.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A COUNCIL OF WAR

CAPTAIN THE HON. ANTHONY NETHERLEY stood leaning over the low stone parapet which encircled the summit of Ba-Bel Rock, gazing gloomily at a broad path of moonlight, whose silver fairway shimmered across the waters of Lake Nawar and dived precipitately into the vast black shadow-caverns built by the forbidding cliffs which overhung its farther shore. The celestial peace of the scene was sorely at variance with the troubled thoughts and dismal anticipations which filled his brain, making of life a weary, profitless burden.

Accustomed to hard knocks, for he had deliberately chosen an active life of usefulness to his fellow-men, rather than follow the uneventful existence of a country gentleman, Tony was no "grizzler"; but, as he told himself, "there are limits!"—Of late, "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" had been speeding in his direction thick and fast, without his having consciously given the Bowman any provocation. Small wonder then, that, cast amongst these descendants of a forgotten civilisation, steeped in the lore of the ancients, he began to wonder whether he were not being penalised for sins committed in some former existence. If so, it was not his notion of cricket; dash it all, whoever arranged these things might at least have the decency to give him some inkling of why he was being doomed to work the "jolly old treadmill!"

It was bad enough to be forced to wear matrimonial shackles not of his own fashioning, when he lacked merely the desire to be fettered at all; but now that he had seen in the dainty hands of Myrtis shackles of a pattern he vastly preferred to those foisted on him by Sir James, resentment against an unjust fate began to embitter even his genial nature. Of course, he might be deceiving

himself ; the sudden avalanche of his own love for her might have smothered his judgment and clouded imagination, leading him to place a false construction on her manner and her actions, but he did not really believe this, and, indeed, had he done so, his wretchedness would have been even more intense.

'Ought he to tell her about Rosalind ? It would be difficult under any circumstances, but the thought of the pain he might see on her sweet face when she understood set his nerves a-quiver and his flesh a-trembling, as if with ague. Supposing he did tell her, and her feelings were as he feared, yet ardently desired ; what would he do ? Could he resist the overwhelming temptation which he knew would come to him, the temptation to throw discretion to the winds, to hold her dear form fast in his arms and charm away the pain with a storm of kisses ? He doubted his strength, and doubting, found himself again in a mass of indecision, faced with the still more insidious temptation to let sleeping dogs lie.

How long he had remained there, floundering helplessly from one treacherous foothold to another, he did not know, but it must have been a considerable time, for now the silver path of moonlight stretched away across the lake to where no shore was visible, and it was no longer swallowed up in the shadow-caverns of the cliffs opposite.

A faint scent, distilled, as he thought, from flowers which could only grow in the Elysian Fields, drifted to his nostrils, momentarily banishing earthly problems and wafting his spirit to heights where peace and happiness were the rule and their antitheses unknown. A dainty, white-clad form stood beside him, a pair of softly-moulded arms were flung outstretched across the parapet, and as he lifted his chin from his hands to look round, he saw the sweet face of Myrtis, her lips parted in the smile he had learned to worship, and in her eyes a light that no mere man of mortal flesh and blood could misinterpret.

" Is it permitted to ask your thoughts, my Tony ? " she said, softly ; " were they, perchance, of the moon yonder ? "

" No, Myrtis, they were of a star," was his rash reply.

The girl's forehead wrinkled perplexedly. "A star?" she queried.

"Yes. Of a star and a tragedy," went on Tony, and, suddenly making up his mind, he told her the story of how he had come to be betrothed to Rosalind. During the first part of this recital, his eyes were set on the rugged mountains opposite, but ever and anon, as he proceeded, they strayed to the lovely face of the girl beside him, whereon perplexity and bitter hurt struggled for mastery. When he had finished, it was quite obvious that she had not really understood why he must marry Rosalind, but it was not incomprehension that made her turn her head and stare fixedly across the lake; it was not incomprehension which was responsible for the slight choking sound, ominously like a sob, that just caught his ear. He had burned his boats—almost on the spur of the moment—and already he felt half-inclined to regret his precipitancy. Moreover, it did not seem to have done any good, since the quixotry of his code was evidently beyond her understanding.

What now? He had told her of the tragedy; should he tell her of the star? Tony fought hard, but he made the fatal mistake of looking at her, and suddenly something on her cheek sparkled like a jewel in the moonlight, scattering the promptings of conscience to the four winds of heaven and leaving behind only an intolerable, aching desire to give her what comfort he could, even at the risk of making matters worse in the long run. Besides, said the tempter, it was always possible that Rosalind had not survived the wreck, and although Tony was far too "white" to wish for such a solution of his difficulties, he could not help but realise that it was by no means out of the question.

Rightly or wrongly, his mind was made up, and he reached out to grasp one of the slim white hands dangling listlessly over the parapet. Myrtis started, and tried to withdraw it, but he tightened his grip and, after a moment, she let her hand lie unresistingly in his.

"Myrtis," whispered Tony, very softly; "I was speaking

just now about a tragedy *and* a star ; I have told you about the tragedy, but of the star whose white light has shown me the tragedy in all its hateful reality, I have not yet spoken. Shall I tell you of that star, Myrtis ? ”

The girl was silent for so long that he feared she had either not heard or not understood, but at last the faintest of whispers came to his ears on the cool night breeze—so faint that he was not quite sure whether it were real, or a figment of his imagination. It sounded like, “ Tell me, Tony,” and at the same time she moved slightly nearer to him—perhaps in order to hear better what he would say.

“ When I came to Ba-Bel Rock, Myrtis,” he said, huskily, and without further preamble, “ I did not love ; nor had I ever loved, although I was promised to Rosalind. Now I do love, and my star is . . . ”

“ Yes ? ” she prompted, shakily, as he hesitated.

“ . . . My star is named Myrtis.” Tony drew her round to face him as he spoke, and she gave a slight gasp at the words, although she must have known what was coming. For a long moment there was no reply, and somewhat dully he wondered how she would take his declaration, especially in view of what had gone before, but when at last she spoke, she made no attempt to disguise her own feelings, nor to feign a hypocritical surprise. Gently releasing his grasp, she placed both hands on his shoulders and came close to him, so that her shining eyes looked into his, and the faint scent from her silky hair was an intoxicating breath from heaven in his nostrils. Very shakily and very softly the words passed her trembling lips, “ My Tony—I do not understand why you must marry this Rosalind, but I do understand about the star, and—Tony, my beloved, I love you—I love you ! ”

Well knowing that it was madness, that by all his canons of honour he was not playing the game, Tony ruthlessly repulsed the faint pleadings of an already stifled conscience and swept Myrtis into his arms, forgetting everything in heaven or earth in the passionate rapture of her kiss.

The minutes passed, and still they stood, just the two

of them alone in a wonder-world of their own making, Rosalind and all her name stood for completely blotted out in the joy of each other, knowing nothing and caring nothing, save that they two loved, and were loved in return.

At length Myrtis let her head fall gently against his shoulder, although her soft white arms still clung to him as if she feared he might disappear from her ken, did she release her hold. "Oh, Tony, my beloved," she whispered, passionately, "must you indeed wed her whom you do not love? Why cannot you stay here with me, where we can be forever happy? Why must Rosalind stand first? Why—oh, why? I do not understand, my Tony."

"Would to God that I could, Myrtis, darling!" he exclaimed, with a passion every whit as intense as hers, "but it is impossible. My word is pledged, and I must keep it. Were I to act otherwise, I should be unworthy of you, and, as one of our English poets says, 'I could not love thee, dear, so well, loved I not honour more'."

"It is I who am not worthy of you, my Tony," she said, quickly; "that you must keep your word, I understand, and, though it break both our hearts, I would not have it otherwise. What I cannot understand is why you gave that dreadful promise; but there, you will think me nought but a barbarian if I say any more."

"Better to mate with a beloved barbarian than that which I must do," he murmured in her ear; "it is hardly surprising that you do not understand, for how should you realise all the foolish imbecilities of our Western civilisation?"

"The airship that brought you to me was not one of those foolish imbecilities, was it, my Tony?" whispered Myrtis, raising her face once more to his.

"God knows, it was not!" he replied, and again their lips met in deliriously happy forgetfulness. So lost were they to all thought of the very existence of anything in the world save each other, that they did not hear footsteps approaching. A sudden exclamation of "Holy St. Andrew!" followed by a hasty scuffle, brought both of

them to sudden realisation of the unwelcome fact that Mother Earth did hold other inhabitants.

Tony was the first to pull himself together, but before he could make up his mind what to do, the voice of Bob Maconochie was heard, bawling tactfully from a considerable distance, "Tony—Ton-y-y—whaur airr ye?"

"But he knows, doesn't he?" murmured Myrtis, innocently.

"Perhaps he didn't recognise us," managed Tony, trying hard not to hurt her by laughing at the naïveté of the remark.

They met Bob at least halfway back across the Plateau, where the Scot capped his previous attempt at tact by exclaiming, "Oh, ye're there, airr ye? I ha' been luikin' for ye a' aboot th' place. A mon has juist come up fra' Forrt Nawarr. Something's happened ower yonder, an' Rames wants ta talk ta a' o' us, ye ken."

Tony's heart went down into his boots as he grasped this piece of intelligence, comprehending all that it might mean to him, whilst a little trembling hand was slipped into his under cover of the darkness.

"I tak' it ye'll come right along th' noo?" asked Bob, and without waiting for an answer, immediately hurried off back to their quarters. Tony warmed towards the genial Scot, and he took full advantage of the opportunity presented. Cold dread had Myrtis in its grip, too, and tears stood in her lovely eyes as, once more in his arms, she surrendered her lips to his passionate caress, which, for aught they knew, might be the last.

A long, low room, draped entirely in austere red; a long, narrow table, painted a dull red, occupying the middle of the apartment; at the head of the table, an armchair of the same colour, the sides of which were carved in the likeness of sphinxes; round the table, seven other chairs, high-backed and narrow, all conforming with the ubiquitous, depressing monotone. Such was the place into which Myrtis led the four men (Peter Brushett being

still confined to his couch) after they had duly assembled in their own quarters. The only relief in the whole room was the Sistrum, or Sign of Life, embroidered in gold on the curtains behind the head of the table, where Rames was already seated, himself robed in the universal red.

Opposite him, at the foot of the table, sat a short, stout man in European dress, unprepossessing to the last degree, and obviously a Slav with more than a trace of the Mongolian. On Rames' right hand was a stalwart Afghan in military uniform, whilst Myrtis, after salaaming profoundly before the High Priest, went to the chair on the latter's left. At a sign from her, the four Europeans took the remaining seats, wondering rather nervously what was about to happen, and whether they were going to be treated to anything uncomfortable in the supernatural line. This feeling was considerably augmented by the dead silence which ensued, lasting a full five minutes. The Russian was clearly ill at ease, and beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead, coalescing into tiny rivulets as minute after minute passed, and still Rames made no sign. As for Tony, who had seated himself next to Myrtis, he would have given worlds to have dared take her hand, but he was afraid of offending her, dreading lest she might attach some importance to all this mumbo-jumbo, and so consider such an action sacrilege.

At long last Rames moved and, before the others had realised it, he was standing upright; how he had reached that position, none of them could have said—at one moment he was seated, silent and motionless, and the next he was towering over them, austere and terrifying. Then he began to speak, addressing himself to the Russian. “Vassily Nicolaevitch, you understand English, do you not?” he asked.

The stout man nodded, bereft of the power of speech; this, indeed, was not surprising, for, quite apart from the effect of that nerve-racking silence, he had told Rames nothing; yet the old man knew his name and was also aware that he spoke English!

“Good,” continued the High Priest, “then we will use

that language, since it is familiar to all here.—This place, Vassily Nicolaevitch, is the Hall of Judgment, wherein Isis, through her ministers, pronounces on matters earthly, such as are settled in your own country by a Court of Law. In this Hall, it is forbidden to speak other than the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth—wherein it differs not from your own Courts of Law. In this Hall, he who speaks not the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, dies as his lips frame the words which are false—wherein it differs greatly from your own Courts of Law. Hear my words, O Vassily Nicolaevitch, and hearing, take warning, lest any falsehood be found in your heart; for Isis is great, Isis is merciful, but Isis is also just, and quick to avenge a breach of her laws."

The Russian's lips moved vainly at first, but at length he succeeded in forcing sound through them and managed to utter the words, "I hear, O Rames, and I swear . . ."

"It is not necessary to swear," interrupted Rames, coldly; "the fact that you are seated at the Judgment Table of Isis constitutes your oath. Proceed with that with which you are charged."

The Russian shivered violently and inserted a trembling hand into his breast pocket, from which he extracted a package. "I am commanded by my master, His Excellency Paul Tcherkev, Ambassador of the Union of Soviet Republics to the Court of Nawar, to give you this, O Rames. What is written therein, I do not know, nor can I say whether it be the truth or not."

"That Isis will decide," said the High Priest, shortly, opening the packet and spreading its contents out on the table. There was another long pause as he read through Tcherkev's letter, glancing occasionally at a map which had been enclosed with it. Then he once more addressed the messenger; "Have you aught else to give me, O Vassily Nicolaevitch?"

"These," replied the Russian, handing over two large, complicated keys, obviously of great age.

"It is well," said Rames, "and now we will see whether your master has written the truth." With these words,

he produced a miniature Sistrum from the folds of his garment and placed it carefully upon the letter. He then stretched his arms slowly forward over the table to their full length, and muttered a prayer in some language unrecognisable by any in the room, save, perhaps, Myrtis. For an instant after his voice had died away, nothing happened ; then, from the tiny Sistrum came a tinkling, as of fairy bells, inexpressibly sweet and infinitely pure in tone. It lasted barely a second, and indeed, so transient was the sound that the Europeans attributed it to imagination until afterwards, when they compared notes and found that all of them had heard it.

"It is well," said Rames, gravely ; "your master has set down nought but the truth. And now, we would speak of these matters ere we give answer. Go outside, Vassily Nicolaevitch ; there you will find a slave, who will take you to where food and drink will be given you. When I am ready, I will send for you."

The Russian heaved his unwieldy body upright, bowed awkwardly and departed, leaving the very air the fresher for his absence.

"My friends," said Rames, without preamble, "since it is you who will have to do that which must be done, I will read you the letter, and you shall judge whether our answer be yea or nay.—

"To Rames, High Priest of Isis, from Paul Tcherkev, Ambassador of the Union of Soviet Republics to the Court of Nawar, greeting ! The time has now come when, with my help, the worshippers of Isis may triumph over those of Set. If you would bring victory to your people, act as follows : On the night of the Feast of the New Moon, the five men who came to you from the airship, or such of them as may be fit, must come to Kala-Nawar, disguised as slaves, and present themselves at the eastern entrance to the building at nine o'clock in the evening. On leaving Ba-Bel Rock, they must first proceed to the Power Station, where an officer will conduct them to the underground passage communicating with the outer courtyard ; this they must traverse alone and, on reaching the building,

they will obtain entrance by giving the sentry the password for the night, which is "Thoth." They must then follow the corridors indicated by arrows on the enclosed plan, until they reach the approach to the mountain dungeons. Here they must repeat the password to the sentry, who will leave his post and conduct them to the two cells in which a lady from the airship and myself are incarcerated. My servant will hand you the keys of these cells, so that our release will present no difficulty. Thereafter, I will show them what they shall do and, if success attends my plans, Set will be overthrown, Isis shall reign in his place, and those who came in the airship will be free to go whither they will.

"' A score of fighting men must also be provided, and I would suggest that you or some of your own people should accompany the party with such instruments of your religion as may seem good to you. Firearms should be carried by all to whom their use is permitted, and a supply of explosives is absolutely essential.

"' In return for my services, I, who, as you are aware, know neither Isis nor Set, ask only that the person of Phorenis, Queen of Nawar, be surrendered unto me, to do with what I will. My servant will bring me your answer, which may be simply yes or no.—PAUL TCHERKEV.'"

"H'm," commented Tony; "he's evidently got it in for the Queen."

"As you say, Paul Tcherkev has 'got it in for' Phorenis," returned Rames, the slang sounding absurdly incongruous on his venerable lips; "that is undoubtedly why we are being honoured with his assistance. Isis uses strange tools and her ways are inscrutable, but surely this Russian of the gutter is the strangest which has ever rendered her service! However, that is not for me, her humble minister, to question, and moreover, we must decide quickly what answer we shall send, for time presses. What say you, my friends?"

"I dinna quite like th' idea o' handin' th' puir wee lassie over ta th' tenderr mairrcies o' th' Roosian," grumbled Bob.

Rames came as near to laughing outright as they had ever heard him. "If you are speaking of the Queen, Mr. Maconochie," he said, "spare your sympathy; it is misplaced. Indeed, she has richly deserved such a fate."

"Well, sir," put in Tony, "I can't say that *I* like it, either, however bad the woman may be.—But what we have to consider, Stewpan, old man, is that by sacrificing one bad egg we can probably save a few dozen good ones."

"That is also my opinion, Messieurs," said de St. Launeuc; "we have no right to protect a woman who, after all, is something of a monster, at the expense of a number of our fellow-countrymen and women, who are anything but monsters. One must fight the devil with his own weapons, Messieurs, and I, for one, give my vote in favour of accepting Monsieur Tcherkev's offer."

Bob drummed with his fingers on the table. "Ye're right th' noo," he said; "I still dinna like it, but we maun dae it."

"It isn't a trap, I suppose?" queried Jimmie Matthieson.

"No," replied Rames, gravely; "the Sistrum has spoken, and the Sistrum cannot lie."

"Good," responded Jimmie, "then count me in."

The old man's face beamed gratification, and although there was undoubtedly a suggestion of triumph in his expression, it was obviously in the main a feeling of holy joy which animated him, rather than anything human or material. "It is well, my friends," he said; "let us, then, discuss our plans. Pistols and ammunition you have, is it not so?"

"Hardly enough ammunition, sir," replied Tony, "but I suppose it will have to do."

To the general astonishment, however, Rames informed them that his people had salvaged from the airship, not only a goodly supply of revolver ammunition, but also a certain amount of blasting powder. He professed to have been instructed to do so by the same vision which had commanded him in the first place to watch on the mountains, and, indeed, short of accepting this extraordinary explana-

tion, there did not seem to be any reason for such action on his part, or even for his presence there at all. Of course, it was just possible that the whole thing was a "put-up job"—that he was hand and glove with Nawar—but not one of the four would have dreamed of crediting him with duplicity of any description, let alone with such nauseating hypocrisy as that theory involved. The ammunition and explosives were, it appeared, stored in the cavern where they had found Peter Brushett on that eventful night, and Rames proposed to send a party of bearers for the stuff at once.

In answer to a question as to whether he himself would accompany the expedition, Rames replied that he must stay in the temple to intercede with Isis, but that Harmachis, who was next in succession, would represent the priesthood. As for the twenty fighting men demanded, these would be Afghans from the village of Lar-Khan, and Tony, who was asked unanimously to assume command, received a promise that he should select them himself.

Rames then proceeded to explain the route by which they must escape from Kala-Nawar afterwards, in order to reach the wooden hut—or rest-house—on the flanks of Gul-Koh, where he had first made their acquaintance. Here guides and bearers would be waiting with supplies sufficient to last until civilisation was reached, whilst Peter Brushett, who would have to travel in a litter, would also join them at the same spot.

"Then we shall not see you afterwards, sir?" asked Jimmie, regretfully.

"No, my friends," replied Rames, "and that is the only thing which causes me sorrow. I go willingly—indeed, joyfully,—to join the Holy Mother, but it grieves me deeply to think that I shall not be accorded the opportunity of thanking you for the great service you will have rendered me, and through me, Isis. Nevertheless, that which is written, must be."

"Could ye no' tak' leave o' us at th' rest-hoose?" asked Bob.

" It may not be. I must remain in the temple, even as I said."

" If the question is permissible, *mon père*," put in de St. Launeuc, " why do you think that you must die? How should death come to you so far away from the scene of fighting ? "

" I know not, my friend," answered the High Priest, " and, even had the manner of my passing been revealed unto me, it would not be lawful that I should say. But rest assured that, living or dead, my thoughts go with you, and the grateful spirit of an old man will not fail you, should harm threaten by the way. Now let us send Paul Tcherkev our answer."

Rames leaned back in his chair and gazed contemplatively at the ceiling, but made no attempt to call anybody, so that the others thought he must have forgotten his intention. A minute passed, a minute of complete silence, and still the old man made no sign. Then suddenly the door opened to admit the bulky form of Vassily Nicolaevitch.

" You sent for me ? " asked the Russian, nervously. It was evident that he was just as ignorant of how he had been summoned as were Tony and the rest, who glanced at one another uneasily, an almost comic expression of bewilderment on their faces.

" I sent for you," responded Rames, " to inform you that our answer is ' yes.' "

## CHAPTER XV

### THE BOOK OF YAOUMA

**Y**VONNE DE ST. LAUNEUC, for all her brave words, felt the cold, clammy fingers of fear closing round her heart as she was marched out of the Throne Room between the two soldiers, a yellow-robed priest leading the way and the Captain of the Guard bringing up the rear. She was not unimpressed with Jamnadas Neewanjee himself, but she had very grave doubts as to how much his protection would be worth, should Kishen Aiyangar make a determined effort to get hold of her. However, there was nothing to be done but to hold one's head high and to show these people that they need expect no squeals for mercy from a noble lady of France.

The quartette left the Throne Room by the curved colonnade, but, instead of crossing the courtyard, they turned sharply to the right, following the row of huge pillars bordering its ancient walls until, with another right wheel, they passed between two massive pylons and found themselves in a gigantic and gloomy temple.

The prisoner was allowed no time to look round, but was hurried into one of a number of cells about half-way along the right-hand wall. It by no means corresponded to Christian notions of a religious cell, being an apartment some fifteen feet square, not uncomfortably furnished, and really more of a combined bedroom and living room than anything else. Heating there was none, and a grating in the door did duty for ventilation, whilst a single electric burner, high up in the ceiling, provided the only source of light, night or day.

With an involuntary gesture, half of resignation and half of helplessness, the girl sank wearily on to the bed, a solid affair of painted wood, furnished with linen and silk coverings dyed various shades of yellow, and over all a magnificent tiger-skin. A faint scent of the East, elusively

fascinating, rose from the silken folds of the pillow, and its intriguing fragrance in her nostrils seemed to soothe her jangled nerves, bringing a sense of peace and well-being which was as dangerous as it was deceptive.

Who or what had been the last occupant, she wondered. If this were a fair specimen of a priestess' cell, obviously Set imposed no such asceticism upon his female votaries as did other gods—a conclusion which coincided with what little she knew or surmised of the cult in question. Certainly there were worse existences than that of a priestess of Set, and lazily she wondered whether her tenancy of the cell would involve taking part in any of the rites. "*Figures-toi!*"—It would be an experience and,—

Yvonne's roving fingers suddenly came into contact with a tiny cross of gold which always hung at her throat, and a shudder of horror convulsed her body, almost as if it had been plunged into ice-cold water. Springing to her feet, she took to waving both arms, in a semi-automatic attempt to disperse the insidious whisperings of that elusive scent, which still clung to her hair. The whole of the girl's innate Christianity rose in revolt at the recollection of the treacherous and unwholesome musings which had begun to invade her brain, and which, rightly or wrongly, she attributed to the influence of the scent. It was bad enough to be confined in this place of essential evil at all, but if stay here she must, she would not sleep on that bed at any price; rather the marble floor, and heaven knew what legacy of rheumatism and aching bones, than stain her soul with thoughts such as those of a moment ago. Desperately, Yvonne clutched the little golden cross which was her sole remaining link with God, until presently her nerves began to recover from the sudden shock, and the pure cold light of reason resumed its sway,—reason which said that God protects His own and that it was her duty, of her own strength, to reject the temptings of the devil, relying upon faith and not upon a scrap of metal, however fashioned. For all that, weak human nature would not be denied, and despite

the concentrated intensity of her determination ruthlessly to crush every vestige of feeble superstition, Yvonne nevertheless drew immense comfort from the possession of the holy symbol, which had been her mother's and her grandmother's, and with which her great-grandmother had gone to the guillotine.

Thought of the guillotine inevitably brought her mind back to modern times, to her own experiences as a fugitive in Russia, a subject upon which she always refused to dwell, and she cast about for something wherewith to divert the trend of her musings, for it was not good to brood upon Bolshevism—especially here, where lurked the dread suspicion that there was some hidden connection between these people and the gang of fiends who had laid waste the great Empire of the Tsars.

Yvonne found distraction in her surroundings, and, freed now from the influence of the drug-like scent, she was able to wander round the apartment and dispassionately to inspect the hieroglyphs and inscriptions with which its walls were covered. The majority were of a religious character, depicting various acts of worship after the formal Egyptian style, and of these she understood but little. In one or two instances, however, their purport was clear enough, ranging from the sacrificial and bestial to the obscene, and she turned aside with a shudder of disgust, although compelled to admit that the artist had been a genius of no mean order.

One would have thought it almost impossible to introduce facial expression under the limitations imposed by absence of perspective, as we moderns understand it, but somehow this man had succeeded in doing so, notably in the case of the god, Set, who appeared in nearly every scene. Precisely how the results had been obtained would have puzzled anyone more expert in such matters than Yvonne, but there was no mistaking the expression which appeared on Set's countenance, wherever depicted. Evil incarnate—“*c'était ça*”; every feature and every line combined together to produce a face so terrible in its utter lack of any redeeming trait, that the painted

stone itself seemed to induce a positive physical terror, a nausea which bade fair to overwhelm the girl's newly-recovered self-control.

Clearly, here was no relief from her thoughts ; even the Bolsheviks could not be quite as bad as that, for, after all, they were human, despite their efforts to demonstrate the contrary. Was this Set *really* a god ? It seemed incredible that he could be the product of human imagination. Why, even Baal and Ashtaroth, Moloch, Tezcatlipoca, and all the other devil-gods of ancient and modern times were gentle as sucking-doves compared with this fiend incarnate, whose diabolical eyes gazed at the shrinking girl from every side, seeming to strip her naked to the very soul.

Yvonne turned away in sick terror, and, the weariness which had afflicted her on first entering the cell returning with redoubled force, she glanced distastefully at the cold, hard floor. Then an idea occurred to her, and, sweeping away every stitch of covering from the bed, she bent down to smell the wood. "*Bien !*" The scent was evidently confined to the clothes and, examination of the tiger-skin having satisfied her that also was untainted, she rolled herself in it and lay down to rest, using her arm as a pillow. For some time she vainly wooed the sleep which would not come, until, in the course of turning this way and that, a hard lump in the skin, some six inches square, obtruded itself forcibly on her notice ; it proved to be a book, neatly sewn on to the underside of the main skin by a patch of exactly similar material.

It was the work of a moment to rip away one end of the patch and extract the book, and, with heartfelt relief at having at last found something with which to occupy her mind, Yvonne settled down to read. The outer cover was of purple silk, and in the centre of both front and back was the letter "Y", exquisitely embroidered in gold thread ; the latter was slightly tarnished, but the silk seemed fresh enough, so that the binding at least was of no great age. There was no clasp, the front cover being provided with a hinged flap, tucked round inside.

The title-page was a work of art in itself, being richly illuminated in purple and gold, and bearing a Greek inscription, of which the following is an approximate translation :—

“ YAOUMA  
 “ Princess of the Blood Royal,  
 “ Queen Dowager of the Kingdom of Nawar,  
 “ Widow of Perses the Tenth, late King of Nawar,  
 “ Mother of Phorenis, Queen of Nawar.  
 “ CHIEF PRIESTESS OF SET.”

There was no date of any kind, but the penultimate line enabled Yvonne to place the lady with some accuracy, since Phorenis could not be more than about thirty, and Yaouma was evidently still living when she ascended the throne. That the reference could be to a previous Queen Phorenis was hardly possible, in view of the good condition of the silk binding and the comparatively slight tarnishing of the gold.

Immediately underneath the title-page was a section of some twenty printed pages, containing religious matter. These opened with what appeared to be a Hymn of Praise to Set, followed by a lengthy section, headed “ The Precepts of Set.”

The latter were printed in tabular form, each “ precept ” being followed by the “ reward ” promised for its proper keeping. At the head appeared a brief exhortation, the translation of which is worth giving in full, since it established beyond doubt the manner of people into whose hands the unfortunate travellers had fallen. Here it is :—

#### “ THE PRECEPTS OF SET

“ BEFORE ALL, see that thou lovest that which is evil and eschewest that which is good, for so shalt thou be strong, thy red blood shall not turn to milk in thy veins, and Set shall strike down thine enemies. Moreover, so shalt thou lust eternally, and eternally revel in satisfaction of thy lusts.

" Set is mighty ! Set is great ! Do that he commandeth, and he shall give thee all that thou desirest, even unto power infinite, passion infinite, and the souls of the good for thy playthings."

Yvonne shivered with uncontrollable horror as she read these ghastly words, but the detailed " precepts " and their " rewards " which followed were even worse, many of them being so hideous that she only half understood their meaning. Utter disgust, a nausea that was almost physical, impelled her to skip the bulk of these terrible beatitudes and turn to the next section, which was apparently some form of ritual.

The printed pages concluded with a repetition of the initial Hymn of Praise, and then came a section which, although written by hand, was easily legible. The entries therein were also in the form of a table, consisting of several columns, headed respectively, " Date," " Emissary," " Event," " Method," and " Inference." Yvonne was entirely unaware of the activities of Nawar's inhabitants, and, lacking the clue which Rames had given her friends on Ba-Bel Rock, she puzzled over the possible meaning of these headings for some time ere reading further.

The column entitled " Emissary " was merely a list of outlandish names which conveyed absolutely nothing to her, whilst the dates ran according to some unknown reckoning, but she had not read far down the third column before coming to the conclusion that it was a list of all the great catastrophes which had convulsed civilisation since long before the Birth of Christ. The idea that Yaouma might have been studying the history of the world was dismissed as soon as conceived, for nothing good that had ever happened was included in this dreadful catalogue.

Some glimmerings of the ghastly truth had, moreover, already penetrated Yvonne's brain ere she began to read the other two columns, whose contents rapidly converted suspicion into certainty, certainty into conviction, and conviction into sheer, stark horror. There could be no doubt that these sheets had been written in the firm belief that all the evils which had been inflicted on suffering

humanity for countless centuries had been engineered by someone at Nawar—whether by Set or his priests, did not appear. Moreover, there was something so diabolical in the way everything fitted together to form a perfect whole, the intercalation of circumstantial detail was so complete and so convincing, that Yvonne had no option but to believe that this was actually a fact, and not merely an hallucination under which Yaouma or somebody else was suffering.

In the name of heaven, who was Set? Was he really some all-powerful god, and was the whole of the Christian religion but a myth, a cruel deception practised on helpless humanity by his agents? Or was he identical with the Satan of the Christians—a personal devil, in whom it was no longer fashionable to believe? A few moments' reflection enabled the girl thankfully to reject the former theory. For one thing, were Set indeed all-powerful, then nothing, save that which he willed, would ever happen; again, throughout the record lying in front of her were many references to some power with which Set was eternally in conflict, a power which, in every instance, seemed to have stepped in more or less at the last moment and averted the worst consequences of his deeds, robbing him of the complete victory for which he was ever striving.

Involuntarily shrugging her shoulders, as if to shake herself free from profitless speculation, the girl turned her attention once more to the closely-written pages, scanning them one after another as the grisly story passed from Persia to Syria, Syria to Greece and Egypt, Palestine to Rome, and so on through the ages down to our own time. Bribery and corruption of nobles and generals, princes, and ministers, appeared with monotonous regularity under "Method" throughout these earlier accounts, whilst the "Inference" column yielded little but unimportant points of detail. Indeed, it was not until she came to an entry relating to the French Revolution that the fifth column really began to be more than a matter of form; at this point, signs of a distinct change in the character of Set's activities began to manifest themselves, and it

became evident that vastly more reasoning was being applied to plans, and method to operations. For almost the first time, the process was one of *undermining* society, rather than trying to strike it down from above, and although again failure was recorded with the advent to power of Napoleon, the "inference" was ominously instructive: "Educate the *canaille*, for so shall their numbers 'wield the power of Set.' "

Yvonne was naturally interested in the French Revolution, and, on going thoroughly into the account, she was startled to find that the catastrophe itself was no mere isolated blow on the part of Set and his priests, but merely the culmination of a concerted plan, having its origin in the rise of the Medici into prominence. The devilish hierarchy in Nawar had deliberately set out so to corrupt and poison the ancient monarchy of France, as to render it intolerable to the better class of citizen, in the hope that the latter would prescribe the false remedy of seizing power and transferring it to the *canaille*. The project succeeded only too well, and the fact that French civilisation was saved from utter destruction was attributed by the writer to the unnamed power of good, which utilised Napoleon for its own ends.

Evidently the priests of Set had immediately realised that, although eventual failure attended their efforts in this particular instance, they had at last hit upon the ideal plan of campaign, so it was with a shiver of apprehension that Yvonne turned the succeeding pages and scanned the history of the nineteenth century through the devil's eyes. Her fears were only too well founded: Set was at work again in 1848 all over the continent of Europe, upon which, with the exception of abortive attempts in India and China, in 1857 and 1900 respectively, he seemed to be concentrating all his energies. It was with no surprise that she found whole pages devoted to Karl Marx, together with a detailed exposition of his doctrines and the possibilities of their application, whilst here there appeared for the first time in the column headed "Emissary" a name she knew—Bakunine.

The systematic subversion of law and order in England—hitherto apparently considered outside “ practical politics ”—also began to be attempted about this time, by means adapted from those employed in France during the last decade of the eighteenth century. Then, later on, she found the special privileges granted to Trade Unions mentioned specifically as “ an instrument for future victory over this most difficult of nations. Our agents have now only to capture the Unions . . . ”

Many sheets were devoted to the Great War, an interesting sidelight on its nominal *casus belli* being accorded by the appearance of the name of the Archduke Ferdinand's assassin under “ Emissary.” The activities of the devil's henchmen during the war, as detailed in Yaouma's writings, were far too extensive to be enumerated here. Suffice it to say that the proceedings of Marxian fanatics in England found special mention, their failure being attributed to the fact that the majority of them were “ honest imbeciles,” lacking the ruthlessness and direct demon-inspiration possessed by, for example, Lenin and Trotsky, who both appeared in the “ Emissary ” column against a date which evidently corresponded to 1917. Bolshevism in Russia was, it appeared, the direct outcome of lessons learned from the experiment of the French Revolution, and Yvonne could not but admit that the priests of Set had profited only too well therefrom; moreover, here were no irresponsible, uneducated *canaille* at the head of affairs, but men of brains, owning *conscious* allegiance to their master, the devil.

The concluding page of this extraordinary history was somewhat scrappy, having clearly been written in a hurry. A hint of the reason for this was contained in a hasty note at the end, wherein Yaouma referred to the near approach of her last hour, and proclaimed her intention of sewing the book into “ the tiger-skin which knows so many of my secrets,” trusting that Set, the almighty god, would see that it fell into the right hands.

Musing grimly that the manuscript had indeed reached “ the right hands,” although not in the sense in which

Yaouma used the phrase, Yvonne leaned back in her chair for the first time since she had begun to read. Had Bob Maconochie been able to see her sweet face then, he would hardly have recognised it, so haggard was its expression, so drawn the lips, and so staring the usually soft and gentle eyes. It was not of her own position that she was thinking, but of humanity. Even were she not a helpless prisoner, what could she do, a mere chit of a girl, against the powers of evil which surrounded her, tracing their descent, their learning, and their experience back through the ages into the dim and misty past ? The weight of years and an awful knowledge seemed to descend upon her as an almost physical burden, threatening to crush her fragile body with their intolerable pressure. Oh, that she had a confidant ! Even Jamnades Neewanjee were better than none, for she could not believe that he knew whom he served—the absence of hell's imprint from his kindly countenance was warranty for that.

Not knowing what she would do, nor even whether she would live to carry it to the outside world, Yvonne closed the book and slipped it into her corsage, where it seemed to her fevered imagination to rest like a leaden weight, heavy with the burden of immeasurable evil which loaded its pages. Then she turned her attention to the tiger-skin, from which she carefully removed the patch and stowed it away inside the silken pillow-case, which was still lying on the floor.

These dispositions were taken not a moment too soon, for, even as she stood upright, the door opened suddenly to admit the priest who had escorted her from the Throne Room. He made no salutation and, indeed, scarcely glanced at her, merely depositing on the table some food he had brought, and departing as silently as he had come.

Somewhat shaken by her narrow escape from discovery—she had not heard a sound until the door opened—Yvonne did not realise for the moment all that this intrusion signified. When she had recovered her nerve sufficiently to sit down and eat, however, it was borne in upon her with startling force that, if this priest could invade her

privacy so unceremoniously, Kishen Aiyangar could do the same. She began to entertain suspicions of the Queen's motives in ordering her incarceration here, and even wondered whether the rebuke administered by Phorenis had not been merely a blind, concealing connivance at the Hindu's designs, whatever they might be. And yet—the Queen did seem to possess some sense of honour; wicked she might be, but not so unutterably base as her mother, Yaouma.

Was it not more probable that the priest who had acted as escort was a creature of Kishen's, and that he had deliberately chosen a cell which, for some unknown reason was *not* inviolable? Yvonne looked nervously round at the furnishings and began to wonder, indeed, whether she were in a "cell" at all.

"*Tiens!*" Guessing would not help. She must see how she could protect herself during the night, for sleep was essential if strength and reason were to be retained. Then, when the priest came again, she would question him on the subject, cunningly—oh, so cunningly,—perhaps even get to see Jamnadas Neewanjee.

The door possessed no handle or catch of any description, but it was fast shut, so that presumably there was some sort of spring-lock on the outside; there had been no sound of a key turning, either when the priest entered or when he left. A barricade was obviously the only solution, and since the door opened inwards, one had only to pile up the furniture against it; this was not heavy enough to prevent entry altogether, but at least there would be sufficient noise to awaken her.

This task accomplished to her satisfaction, Yvonne completed her meal, and, rolling herself in the tiger-skin, lay down once more to sleep. It was hopeless; her whole body was infinitely weary, her head ached and her eyes were swimming, but jangled nerves and throbbing pulses effectually kept Morpheus at bay, whilst a heterogeneous procession of thoughts on every subject under the sun scurried and surged through her overburdened brain until she felt she would go mad, did relief not come soon.

Then at last, peace—a peace heralded by nothing external, but by a picture conjured up in her own mind, emerging serene like some silvery moon over the wild Valkyries' Ride of her thoughts. Had one told Bob Maconochie—without disclosing the name of the perpetrator of the simile—that his genially ugly face would ever be compared, however unconsciously, to a silvery moon of peace, his comments would have been distinctly ribald ; but had he known that at that moment it was his face which came to the rescue of Yvonne's reason, lighting her back from the brink of madness, he would promptly have entertained more respect for it than he usually did.

Slowly the vision formed in Yvonne's mind, developing gradually from head to head-and-shoulders, and then to the whole of his stocky form, standing sturdily firm in empty space, which but a moment before had been filled with the wild creatures of an overburdened imagination. So real was the vision, so clear and unmistakable every feature of the Scot's cheery grin, that, even in the act of falling into the sleep which he had brought her, the girl raised both arms towards him in glad surrender, her lips murmuring, "Bob . . . ."

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE ROAD TO LAR-KHAN

THE village of Lar-Khan was situated at the northern extremity of the small triangular shelf of habitable land forming the domain of Nawar. Perched on the edge of a precipice, which descended sheer to the waters of the lake far below, it had a curiously insecure appearance as one approached it from Kala-Nawar along the road leading past Ba-Bel Rock. It was well above the limit of altitude for crops, and the pasture land, which was already becoming too steep for anything but goats, terminated less than a quarter-of-a-mile beyond the village in unscalable cliffs, rising in titanic terraces to a north-south range two miles away to the eastward.

Considering the position of their village, one would naturally expect the men of Lar-Khan to be a hardy race, and as Tony, accompanied by Harmachis and Myrtis, toiled up the last two hundred yards of the road, he fully understood why the rulers of Nawar had never been able to subdue these particular Afghans.

Myrtis, it appeared, was hereditary Princess of Lar-Khan, some distant ancestor of hers having been granted the title by acclamation, as a reward for defeating a plot of the then King of Nawar to bring the village under his own rule. Hers was, therefore, the deciding voice in any scheme involving the employment of her subjects, and it was for this reason that she now accompanied Tony on his mission of choosing men for the perilous task of overthrowing the age-old régime in Kala-Nawar.

The Feast of the New Moon was due on the morrow, but Tony, although every bit as eager as the others to be up and doing, was conscious of a dull ache at his heart, a misery filling his whole being and rendering him entirely unresponsive to the exhilarating influence of their eleven-mile walk in the glory of an early morning. The signal

to embark on the rescue of his friends would also be the signal to part for ever from Myrtis. That was the whole burden of his thoughts, and not all the sunshine, the scented breeze fanning his cheeks, the smiling fields and the glittering waters of Lake Nawar, could lighten its dead-weight of bitter, unavailing regret by a single grain.

Myrtis' lips were set, her face pale, and it is to be feared that the principles of Isis, instilled into her from earliest childhood, were utterly ineffective to counter the bitter enmity which filled her soul as, day and night, she thought of that other woman to whom Tony was irrevocably bound by the bond which is stronger than steel and tougher than whipcord—honour.

Harmachis knew nothing of the seething cauldron which was the mind of each of his companions, nor indeed, had he the slightest inkling of the real state of affairs. Rapt in serene contemplation of the approaching triumph of Isis over the forces of evil, *his* soul held no place for aught but a great and overwhelming happiness, a holy joy which transcended all earthly things. This glorious morning was to him but a symbol of what should be over the whole earth, when the power of Set had been brought to utter destruction, and although, like Rames, he was persuaded that his days were numbered, death's nearness was not even as the weight of a feather in the balance; rather was it an added reward, since it would bring him closer to the Holy Mother, Isis.

It was, therefore, hardly surprising that the eleven miles from Ba-Bel Rock to Lar-Khan were covered in unbroken silence. Two at least of the trio would gladly have gone on thus until the end of time, each content in the nearness of the other, nor asking aught else of life than that the bitterness of parting pass them by; but time moves inexorably, supremely indifferent to the trivial sorrows of puny humanity, and all too soon Lar-Khan was reached.

Its quaint stone cottages, surprisingly clean and neat, were, in that respect as in nearly every other, utterly unlike any native village Tony had ever seen; no poverty

here, no misery, nor squalor. Its inhabitants were mostly small in stature, but well set up and wiry, and obviously superior in intelligence to the average Oriental of the masses, be he Sikh or Hindu, Chinese or Tibetan, Malay or Burmese. Scantly, though adequately clad, their clothes would have shamed many a poorer class district in the cities of the West, whilst there was none of that hypocritical cringing generally so much in evidence when the white man ventures to penetrate the native haunts of the East. On the contrary, the people of Lar-Khan betrayed a sturdy independence which was not insolent, an absence of curiosity which did not amount to indifference, and a respect which, whilst far removed from servility, would have made it patent to a much more superficial observer than Tony that they worshipped Myrtis ; even in this, however, their devotion was evinced by the expression of their faces, the look in their eyes, and not by extravagant gesture or effusive protestation.

Zeman, the head man of the village, who had acted as a sort of regent during the long minority of Myrtis and who still exercised control during her absence, received the trio with grave welcome, himself conducting them to a tiny palace where she occasionally resided. Whilst food was being brought, Myrtis briefly explained their errand, and commanded Zeman to assemble the fighting men of Lar-Khan—some eight hundred all told—before the palace, which was built in the open, a little apart from the village. The head man, who stood head and shoulders above his fellows and would, indeed, have been accounted a giant, even in the West, saluted in military fashion and departed, his every movement eloquent of perfect discipline.

Tony was considerably impressed by the surroundings, and not a little astonished. On first hearing that Myrtis was hereditary Princess of Lar-Khan, he had not supposed that the village was anything more than the usual collection of hovels, sheltering perhaps a few hundred natives of both sexes, and his ideas underwent substantial readjustment on finding it almost a town, boasting, in fact, well over seven thousand inhabitants.

Characteristically, he burst into speech as soon as Zeman was gone and they had sat down to eat. "I say, dash it all, Myrtis," he exclaimed, "I had no idea you were such an important person—important in that way, I mean."

She smiled. "Oh, in what other way am I important?"

"Well . . ." ; Tony looked into her eyes and glanced significantly at Harmachis, who understood English ; but the priest was still lost in his own thoughts and would probably have noticed nothing, even had the other two made love under his very nose. Myrtis blushed confusedly ; she had not realised the naïveté of her question, nor the construction which would be put upon it.

"You know," continued Tony, presently, "we are highly honoured, of course, but it makes me ashamed to think you have been waiting on us all this time."

"It was commanded," she said.

"Well, all I've got to say is that Rames should have known better," commented Tony, reddening indignantly ; "it has been topping, but still, that kind of thing simply isn't done."

Myrtis, whose intelligence more than made up for the gaps in her knowledge of colloquial English, understood quite well what he meant, although the concluding expression was new to her, and she hastened to defend Rames. "My guardian merely obeyed, too," she explained ; "Isis commanded, not her High Priest. It has long been a tradition that Set would eventually be overthrown by the aid of strangers who, whilst of an alien religion, nevertheless worshipped the eternal spirit of good under another name, and who, according to the words of the ancient prophecy, must be served by none other than the highest in the land, saving only the priesthood."

"H'm, that settles it," commented Tony, tersely, but without irreverence. He relapsed once more into gloomy silence and went on eating mechanically, his thoughts resuming their endless flight round the vicious circle of bitter regrets and vain longings.

Their meal finished, Myrtis led the way out on to a

flight of steps commanding the open space before the palace, where the fighting men of Lar-Khan were already assembled, Zeman at their head. A mighty shout of salutation rent the air as she appeared, and simultaneously, without word of command, every rifle was raised vertically into the air to the full extent of its owner's right arm. A moment's hushed pause; then, again without word of command, eight hundred odd rifles came down to the "order" with a precision which the finest troops of western Europe could hardly have emulated. It was magnificent, and Tony felt that he could conquer the world with a handful of men such as these.

Deep silence reigned as Myrtis advanced to the head of the steps and, speaking in their own tongue, began to address her subjects. She told them that an attempt would be made on the morrow to subdue Kala-Nawar for all time, and explained that, foreign though it was to their nature and religion, the enormous odds necessitated the employment of guile. Consequently, the fighting force could not exceed twenty, and although she knew she could count to the death on every man present—a subdued murmur of approbation ran through the assembly at this, like wind amongst the trees—there was no alternative but to pick the number she had mentioned. Then, beckoning Tony to come forward, she continued:

"This sahib, my children, is Captain Netherley, who springs from that great British race of which we have heard from our priests and teachers. He is to command the expedition, and I charge you, whoever may be chosen, to guard him as you would myself. It is the command of Myrtis." Thereupon she turned to the embarrassed Tony, placed her hands on his shoulders, and kissed him on the forehead before them all, immediately afterwards standing aside that he might receive the great salute.

As soon as rifles were once more at the "order"—the position used being scarcely different from our own—she explained that Tony did not speak their language, and commanded that those who had been instructed in the English tongue should step forward one pace. There was

no hesitation or confusion ; immediately on the word, some fifty men advanced from the ranks, and these Zeman, at a sign from Myrtis, assembled at the foot of the steps. Then Tony, accompanied by Myrtis, descended and walked slowly along the line, addressing himself to the difficult task of picking out the best from material that was all of the best. At last this was accomplished, and those who had not been chosen, giving no sign of the disappointment they felt, nor even within themselves questioning his decision for one instant, returned to their places.

Myrtis then commanded Zeman to dismiss all but the twenty, and after repeating the great salute for the third time that morning, the troops marched back into the village, where they dispersed to their homes. As soon as the last file had disappeared, Tony descended once more to his little force in order to make the acquaintance of each man individually, after which he handed them over to Harmachis and Zeman. The former had been instructed by Rames to remain behind and make all necessary arrangements, bringing the party along to the road at the foot of the aerial ropeway by a quarter to eight on the following evening.

Myrtis spent the rest of the morning showing Tony round her domain, since they did not propose to start back until after the mid-day siesta. It was evident that she took a very great personal pride, not only in her material possessions, but also in her people, going about the streets in a manner which would have been impossible anywhere else in the East. Indeed, the whole of the relations between ruler and people had far more in common with English ideas than with those of even other occidental countries. Tony himself, wedded to the active life as he was, felt the influence of that quiet peace which reigned all around, and longed to be done with strife and problems and nerve-racking employments. What more could he ask of life than to spend the rest of his days in this placid spot, high enough to avoid the insidious languor of the tropics, and tropical enough to keep at bay the irritable restlessness of more temperate climes ? What better

fate, indeed, than to rule these clean, unspoiled children of nature by the side of Myrtis, whom love had made forever his, no matter by how many thousands of unbridgable miles, by how many score of insuperable obstacles they were separated—his, though death itself came in between! Yet Destiny, the inscrutable, had decreed otherwise, and he was fettered by chains which even love could not break, and remain love.

Tony lay in a hammock on the shady verandah of the palace, half-dreamily allowing these thoughts to wander unchecked through his mind, and succumbing imperceptibly to the gentle caress of that peaceful content which pervaded Lar-Khan and its inhabitants. Content—that was the explanation. How widely different, what poles asunder from the fret and fume of Western civilisation, from the eternal *discontent* which our word-merchants, echoing the phrase of someone who must have been either mad or else an agent of the devil himself, unctuously miscall “divine.” “Divine discontent!” Surely no two words in the whole of the English language have caused such a widespread welter of misery, broken so many lives and dealt such an irreparable blow at the happiness of our race!

Musing thus, with half-closed eyes, Tony was startled by a barely realised glimpse of someone running; believing himself mistaken, he nevertheless opened wide his eyes and stared curiously at the outskirts of the village, where he thought he had observed the movement. By Jove! There *was* a man running! He had imagined nobody ever ran in these parts at any time, let alone during the heat of the day. Curious, too, how the fellow was dodging from house to house, keeping in such shadows as there were; it rather looked as if he were up to no good, though somehow one could not associate crime of any kind with peaceful Lar-Khan. Presently the man appeared on the road and, after running along it for a short distance with repeated glances over his shoulder, dropped into a steady walk and passed out of sight.

A moment later, another man emerged from the village

and, without any attempt at concealment, proceeded along the road at an ordinary pace in the wake of the first. Funny ; it looked uncommonly like Zeman's burly form, but surely the "old buffer" would not go chasing malefactors himself—that is, if the other man *were* a malefactor. Tony's interest flagged as the second man also disappeared from sight where the road dropped below a terrace of rock, and his eyes closed languidly. The affair was none of his business, anyhow, even had he not been too far away to be sure of the facts, let alone to interfere.

. . . . .

It was close on five o'clock when, after a light meal, Tony and Myrtis started out for Ba-Bel Rock. The mid-day siesta, followed by the inevitable renewal of his miserable thoughts on waking, had put the incident of the running man clean out of Tony's head, but it was doubtful whether he would have considered the matter worth mentioning, in any case.

At first steeply, then more gently, the road sloped downwards for half the distance, at which point it passed through the village of Tak-Khil and thereafter followed the right bank of the mountain stream, which flowed past Ba-Bel Rock on its northerly course to mingle with the waters of Lake Nawar. They did not attempt conversation ; speech was too chokingly impossible, with the final parting looming nearer and ever nearer as the minutes sped by to join the tale of the past. Hand clasped in hand immediately Lar-Khan was hidden from view—they were only human, after all—the two passed silently on, impelled towards their ultimate fate by the sheer force of their own wills, whilst every nerve, every fibre of their being cried out in protest at this thing which was being done in the sacred name of duty.

Tak-Khil differed from Lar-Khan as widely as if situated in another hemisphere ; dirty, untidy and ramshackle, the squalid hovels bordering its narrow, tortuous streets filled Tony with repulsion, and he wondered why the priests of Ba-Bel Rock had not constructed a by-pass,

in order to avoid this village on the way to and from Lar-Khan. There was nobody in the streets, but he noticed that even Myrtis, who must be more or less used to the place, shrank closer to his side as they made their way in and out amongst the heaps of filth.

Suddenly, just as they had reached the farther outskirts, and were passing a cottage rather better built than the rest, he felt himself seized from behind in a mighty grip and dragged back against the wall. At the same moment, a man dashed past him, and he caught the gleam of a knife descending straight for Myrtis' back.

It was all over in a flash. Two shots rang out, he saw the knife go spinning, the grip at his waist relaxed, and he staggered backwards, falling heavily over the inanimate heap which had been his assailant. Myrtis ran towards him as he scrambled up, and, without a word of explanation, seized his arm, half pulling him through the open door of the cottage. The next moment two dead bodies came flying in, landing with heavy thuds on the ground, and were followed by Zeman, who slammed the door and stood against it, breathing heavily.

"What on earth . . ." began Tony, but instantly Myrtis put her hand over his mouth and signed to him to keep perfectly still. The reason was immediately apparent, for the street had already filled with natives running hither and thither, clearly searching for the source of the shots. Pandemonium reigned, whilst for ten long minutes the three stood there, scarcely daring to breathe, and dreading every moment to hear the hammering on the door which would tell of discovery.

It did not come, but not until the last yelling native had left the street, and the village had again relapsed into the profound stillness which had been so rudely disturbed, did they relax their attitude of strained attention. Then only did Zeman bend down and turn over the dead bodies, both of which had fallen face downwards.

"I thought so," he said, pointing to the smaller of the two; "he live in Lar-Khan long time, say he want worship Isis. I think him spy, but never sure till to-day. He

hide in bushes this morning ; hear what mem-sahib say. I nearly lose him ; he run away this afternoon. I follow ; he come this house, which belong this"—Zeman kicked the other body—"him belong Kala-Nawar. I hide in pig-house over there"—pointing across the street—"big man get sahib, little man go for kill mem-sahib. I shoot pistol. Both dead. Sahib and mem-sahib safe. No news go Kala-Nawar."

Tony held out his hand. "Congratulations, Zeman," he said, "and my best thanks. You're some fellow in a scrap, and I wish you were coming with us to-morrow night."

Zeman beamed with pride and gratification as he surveyed his handiwork, while Myrtis added her own thanks.

"What I can't quite understand," said Tony, "is why that greasy-looking chunk of beef didn't knife *me*."

"Him like this," replied Zeman ; "little man kill mem-sahib ; him go back Lar-Khan, say sahib done murder mem-sahib. Then Lar-Khan hate sahib, hate Isis, men no fight to-morrow."

"The swine!" exclaimed Tony, savagely.

"Both swine," nodded the head man ; "big pig, he go Kala-Nawar, tell all. Nardanus catch sahib and other sahibs. Nasty, very nasty."

"I believe you," agreed Tony, drily.

"I was afraid that rabble outside would see the blood," put in Myrtis.

Zeman made an expressive grimace. "Him street dirt, all dirt," he explained ; "no can see blood, and I got knife." Slipping a hand into his garment, he pulled out the weapon, a deadly-looking triangular affair, which he displayed with evident pride. Tony shuddered as he remembered how near the thing had been to piercing the girl's back, and involuntarily he grasped her hand.

Zeman, if he saw the action, took no notice, but, returning the knife to its place, pointed to the bodies. "Must bury," he said, tersely.

The floor was of fairly soft earth, so, with the aid of

several primitive agricultural implements which were stacked in a corner, they had no difficulty in making a hole big enough to take the dead men. Moreover, it was not necessary to do more than cover the bodies and flatten down the earth, since the morrow would bring success or failure against Nawar, and subsequent discovery would make no difference either way.

It was already dark by the time their task was finished, and Zeman insisted that Tony and Myrtis should leave first, he himself remaining on the watch until they had had plenty of time to get back to Ba-Bel Rock. Tony rather demurred, for he did not like the idea of leaving the faithful head man to return alone through the streets of Tak-Khil, but Zeman was adamant. He pointed out that there was really no danger to him, and, even if there were, it was his duty to run the risk.

There was nothing more to be said, so Tony and Myrtis bade him a grateful farewell and resumed their journey to the foot of the aerial ropeway, which they reached without further incident about an hour-and-a-half later.

Myrtis gave the usual signal, and as they stood waiting for a car to descend, realisation of what would have been his thoughts now, had the knife reached its mark, rushed over Tony in a flood, causing his very flesh to shrink at the narrowness of her escape. That henceforth their lives must be lived far apart made no difference ; that the death of Myrtis would have been followed swiftly by his own hardly entered his mind. His whole soul, every nerve, every fibre of his being, revolted at the thought of that hideous knife desecrating the fair temple of her body.

The scent of her hair rose maddeningly to his nostrils as she stood by his side in the darkness, and the nearness of her, the intoxication of her sweet presence, seized upon heart and mind alike, filling him with wild longing, driving his tortured brain to deadly hatred of that woman of his own race to whom he was bound, and for whom they must suffer the bitter, soul-destroying anguish of life-long parting.

Incontinently, ignorant that the car was already waiting, caring nothing whether there were eyes to see or ears to hear, he suddenly seized the girl in his arms, crushing her fragile form in a passionate embrace and whispering chokingly, "Oh Myrtis, if that fiend had killed you—my beloved. . . ."

## CHAPTER XVII

### YVONNE LEAVES SANCTUARY

YVONNE was awakened by the sound of chanting, which welled in successive waves of crescendo and diminuendo through the grating, alternately filling the cell with a volume of music and receding again until it became little more than a faint murmur in the distance, muted by intervening columns and vast spaces.

Her barricade was still in position, so that evidently no attempt had been made to effect an entry during the night, which, judging from a slight change in the quality of the light, was already past. Refreshed by sleep, and reassured by the absence of any untoward incident, Yvonne rose and replaced all the furniture with the exception of a single chair ; this she left in position, so that its warning scrape might avoid a repetition of the unpleasant shock of the previous evening.

Meanwhile, worship of some description was in progress, and the prisoner seriously endangered her eyesight by squinting sideways through the grating, in order to see what was happening at the far end of the temple. Occasionally portions of a procession of gesticulating priests and priestesses, all clad in the sacerdotal yellow, came within her field of view, but it was quite impossible to obtain a glimpse of the altar, or of the huge idol which she had dimly descried the previous afternoon.

Immediately in front of her cell, in the middle of the temple, stood a fountain, exquisitely carved from white marble ; the central figure rose fully twenty feet into the air, but, in spite of its huge size, every detail was perfect and the limbs were moulded with an artistry which Yvonne, in spite of her world-wide travels, had never seen equalled.

The temple wall beyond was provided with a row of doors similar to the one through which the girl was peering.

More cells, probably, and she wondered who or what might be spying on her from those sinister gratings, until she realised that, if she could not see them, neither could they distinguish her.

Then, without the faintest warning, fountain, columns and temple wall were shut off from view, and she found herself staring through the bars into the expressionless face of the priest whom she had rashly determined to question. The suddenness of the apparition brought a startled cry to her lips, and involuntarily she retreated a few steps, whilst the priest, without giving the slightest indication that he had seen her, opened the door and entered, calmly pushing back the chair as if unaware that its position held any special significance. He had again brought food, which he deposited silently on the table as before, and he would have departed in the same manner, had not Yvonne summoned courage to pluck his sleeve.

Still uttering no sound, he stopped in his tracks and, turning to face her, waited impassively.

Now that it had come to the point, all the girl's carefully rehearsed questions, designed with a view to obtaining information without seeming to do so, vanished from her brain, and for several moments she stood speechless, feeling excessively foolish. At last, blunderingly, bluntly, she blurted out the words, "Who are you?" in the best Greek she could muster.

Not a vestige of expression showed on the priest's face, but apparently he understood from the movement of her lips, for, raising one hand, he pointed to his ears and then to his mouth, which he opened wide to show her that he had no tongue.

The man was a deaf mute, and this, whilst exciting her pity, for some reason also reassured her, restoring self-control to a certain extent. Carefully mouthing the words, she put another direct question, "How is it you are permitted to enter the cell of a priestess?"

A slight look of puzzlement disturbed the man's mask for a fleeting instant, and then he seemed to be casting round for some means of conveying a reply. His eyes lit on the

mural decorations and, crossing the cell, he pointed to a particularly atrocious specimen, depicting the mutilation of a helpless infant. Accustomed as she was to the East and its ways, Yvonne could not altogether repress a natural shrinking, but almost immediately she came out with an impulsive, "Oh, I'm sorry!" This time the priest's face took on an unmistakable expression—surprise; he almost smiled, and, when Yvonne gave him a slight nod of dismissal, bowed quite low ere leaving the cell.

So there was nothing to be feared from him and, moreover, the girl felt that, for all her undiplomatic bluntness, she had made something approaching a friend; yet, dare one place confidence in *any* worshipper of Set? Yvonne thought of Yaouma's book and shuddered. To be sure, it was quite possible that there were many degrees in the priesthood, and that the lower grades (to which this man undoubtedly belonged) knew little or nothing of the real meaning of the cult, but all the same —. Well, time would shew, and meanwhile one must eat.

Really excellent rolls were always served with the first meal of the day at Nawar, and she was about to break one of these in half, when she noticed that it had been cut partly through. Ever on the alert in this place for anything unusual, she carefully opened the roll and found embedded there a tiny folded square of paper, which she extracted with trembling fingers, afterwards straightening it out on the table.

The note, for such it was, bore no address or superscription, but merely the following, written in English, "Mem-sahib is in danger. Secret door behind bed will open at 10 o'clock this evening. Put on robe and follow messenger.—Jamnadas Neewanjee."

So there was yet another entrance into this cell! That was the first thought which occurred to Yvonne, even in her excitement at the possibility of escape. Had she known last night, she would never have been able to sleep, and her heart beat suffocatingly at the realisation of how helpless she would have been, had Jamnadas Neewanjee not been on the watch. That the note itself might be a

forgery did not even enter her mind ; she had only seen the Captain of the Guard's handwriting once—his signature on the command to attend Court the previous day—but the similarity was sufficient to lull any suspicions she might otherwise have entertained.

“*Mais quelle bêtise !*” — What did the man mean by “put on robe ?” He surely did not suppose she would go wandering about in her nightdress, even if she had had one, which was not the case ! Perhaps the messenger would bring some sort of disguise ; yes, that was it, of course ; how utterly absurd not to have understood immediately ! This imprisonment must be affecting her brain.

Slowly, second by second, the day dragged its weary length along, broken only by the appearance of the Eunuch-Priest with food at mid-day and dusk. He was impassive as ever, the only sign of recollection he gave being to accord her a salutation on entering and leaving the cell, a courtesy which had been conspicuous by its absence on his first two visits.

Soon after his final appearance, and before she had finished her meal, there was a slight scraping sound in the corner as a section of wall swung inwards, pushing her bed in front of it. Now that it had come to the point, doubts assailed her, and these were by no means diminished by the fact that no one entered ; indeed, had it not been for the yawning black hole in the wall, she might have put the sound down to imagination—or mice.

*Tiens !* This would not do ! She, a de St. Launeuc, to shew the white feather ! The thought steadied her and she went across to investigate. Nevertheless, in spite of her determination and of the fact that she fully expected to find some one there, she was utterly unable to repress a start at being confronted with a tall, dark-faced priest, who was standing impassively just outside the opening. He pointed silently to a yellow robe over his arm, and she beckoned him to enter.

“It is not permitted,” he said, in Hindustani, holding the robe at arm’s length, so that she could reach it.

Evidently this was the only disguise which Jamnadas Neewanjee considered safe, so Yvonne, conquering her distaste at the idea of wearing the devil's livery, hurriedly donned the hateful thing. This done, she was about to pass through the opening, when her eyes lit upon the unfinished supper, consisting of cold meat and bread. With the reflection that the source and time of her next meal were alike problematical, she slipped the food into one of the robe's capacious pockets and turned to follow the priest.

Was it imagination, or did she detect a faint gleam of amusement in his eyes as he observed her action? "*Tiens! Ce n'est pas son affaire!*" she muttered, with a shrug, but the incident had increased her uneasiness, and by the time she had followed her guide through an almost unbelievable thickness of wall into one of the familiar lighted corridors, she had to summon up every ounce of will-power to restrain herself from fleeing, panic-stricken, back into the cell. Now, for the first time, serious doubts began to assail her as to whether the message really had come from Jamnadas Neewanjee. Her guide's refusal to enter the cell recurred to her mind, invested with a new significance. There *was* something in this sanctuary business, then, and if that were the case, what possible harm could have come to her in the cell? Bitterly she regretted her precipitancy in taking so much for granted, and unmercifully she anathematised herself for not questioning the Eunuch-Priest, or at least for not trying to ascertain whether he had known of the note.

Well, it was too late now, and there was nothing for it but to trust to her wits to extricate her from any predicament into which she might be plunged, although she had an unpleasant conviction that her wits would be of precious little use against such a man as Kishen Aiyangar, armed with the awful powers which these priests of Set appeared to wield. Impulsively, a hand went up to her throat, and slender fingers closed tightly round the little gold cross which still hung there, the mere contact seeming

to transmit a glowing current of strength along her shaken nerves.

Somewhat calmer, Yvonne was able to take more note of direction, and she deliberately set herself to memorise their route. Sub-consciously she had been aware that, so far, they had merely traversed a long, straight corridor without branches or visible doors, but now the passage itself turned abruptly to the left and, after another straight section of some thirty yards, again to the right. A few moments later, they were crossing a corner of the central courtyard, and she thought she recognised the Throne Room entrance. Leaving this on their left, they plunged into a short corridor and, after passing through an open-air garden and the music room, emerged on to the great gallery.

Pausing in front of the living apartments which Alan had seen, the guide pushed open a glass door and stood aside to let her pass, which, after a moment's hesitation, she did. The room was in darkness, mitigated hardly at all by the faint glow from the starlight outside, and she had not taken more than three steps forward when there was an ominous click behind her. She was alone! Glancing round in sudden fear, Yvonne had just time to see the vague silhouette of her guide's head and shoulders, passing along the gallery, before heavy curtains moved by an invisible hand blotted out window, door and starlight, rendering the darkness utterly impenetrable.

Nameless dread seized the girl in its icy grip, paralysing her limbs. She remained rooted to the spot, every nerve taut and tingling, ears strained to catch the faintest sound, eyes smarting and burning in a vain endeavour to pierce the velvety wall of blackness, whilst the shuddering throb of her heart threatened every moment to suffocate her.

How long this intolerable suspense endured, Yvonne, only too sure now that she had been betrayed, could not tell. It seemed aeons that she had remained thus, a single vital spark motionless in a world of nothing—a world, nevertheless, whose very atmosphere seemed to her straining senses to be seething with the awful words of the exhorta-

tion, "Before all, see that thou lovest that which is evil, and eschewest that which is good . . ."

Almost had she preferred that the surrounding space were filled with a pandemonium of yelling demons, seeking to devour her, rather than endure the beating of those soundless words upon her ears; the incessant vibration of their inexorable repetition seemed to shake the very foundations of her faith, making it rock and totter like a house built upon the quicksands of far-off Brittany.

The strain was too great. Feeling consciousness leaving her, Yvonne fought with frantic determination to meet her fate, whatever it might be, with wide-open eyes, holding fast to the knowledge that Set and his priests had no power to harm her soul, even though they tortured her body with a thousand deaths.

It was an unequal struggle, which could have had but one ending, had not relief come in the shape of her tormentor's next move. Even as the girl's body swayed uncertainly and her swimming brain became no longer able to demand obedience from the shrinking flesh, a tiny red spark appeared; at first, as it seemed, miles away in the distance, then rapidly approaching, expanding as it did so into a fiery ball of swirling mist, until it occupied the whole of her field of vision.

Gradually, the fantastic convolutions of the smoky wreaths coalesced and took shape, forming themselves into the common, everyday appointments of an ordinary room, whilst on a table in front of her were various laboratory appliances, familiar and unfamiliar, together with a row of flasks containing liquids and solids of one sort or another.

At the table sat a man whose features Yvonne could not at first distinguish, but whose eyes blazed and shone like two great coal-black diamonds, triumphantly immune in the midst of a furnace. Then finally the ruddy glare itself began to fade and die, merging imperceptibly into successive shades of pink, which in turn dimmed and disappeared beneath the mellow glow of ordinary electric light. At the same time, in proportion as the unholy red blaze

paled, the features of him who sat at the table began to assume shape and form ; at first mere faint lines, pencilled on a blank sheet, then acquiring contrasts of light and shade, until finally the hateful visage of Kishen Aiyangar was revealed, its sinister contours perfect in all their evil beauty.

"Sit down," he commanded in excellent English, whereat the girl, white and shaken, groped blindly for a chair and collapsed into it, trembling violently.

The thin lips of the priest betrayed no sign of any emotion at his victim's pitiable condition,—neither of amusement, gratification nor contempt—nor did he make any further remark for the moment.

At last Yvonne, recovered somewhat from her ordeal, and determined not to endure another purgatory of silence if it could be avoided, summoned up courage to speak, her voice sounding harsh and strained, utterly unlike her usual musical accents :

"Where is Jamnadas Neewanjee ? "

Kishen Aiyangar gave no sign that he considered the question childish or superfluous, but answered with unemotional gravity, "Forgive me if I have tricked you, Mademoiselle de St. Launeuc . . ."—Yvonne started ; how did he know her name ?—" . . . but it was necessary, in order to save you in spite of yourself and in spite of the Queen. I knew that, for some reason, you were inclined to trust Jamnadas Neewanjee, so I adopted this method of bringing you here."

The girl passed a hand wearily across her forehead. "You speak in riddles," she said ; "what do you mean by 'save' ? All that *I* have seen here typifies destruction."—Then, with an access of defiance, she added, "And if you merely wished to *save* me, why try and terrify me out of my wits with your conjuring tricks ? "

Aghast at her own temerity, Yvonne stopped short and waited for the storm to break. The Hindu did not appear in the least offended, however, and merely picked up a flask of some yellow fluid, which he contemplated

abstractedly whilst answering, "To be saved, you must trust in my powers, and to trust in my powers, you must have witnessed them."

"From what should I be saved, then?" Yvonne was not in the least deceived, but she felt that her only chance of escape, if chance there were, lay in prolonging the conversation and pretending acquiescence.

"Yesterday afternoon," went on Kishen Aiyangar, "the Queen offered you and your friends life and freedom if you would consent to be inoculated with a certain preparation, which would destroy all memory of your experiences at Nawar. This she pretended to do at my instigation, but the matter was planned ere ever your airship was brought to these realms, and the effects of the preparation are quite other than those mentioned." The Hindu leaned forward impressively and, holding up the flask so that the fluid within scintillated and sparkled again as the rays of light caught its limpid surface, continued his exposure of the diabolical plot:

"Here it is—the elixir which the priests of Set have been seeking for five thousand years, the stuff of which men dreamed in your own Europe, when they practised the cult you so crassly term 'Black Magic.' Two drops of this fluid, injected into a man's veins, so act upon his mind that, whilst retaining his outward appearance as before, his whole nature becomes changed; thenceforward consciously or unconsciously, he acknowledges and obeys the laws of Set, the almighty god. No thought of holiness, no recognition of Isis—or, as you Occidentals would say, of God—can enter the heart or brain of him who has received this fluid in his body, which from that time forth is devoted to our great master, to whom also his soul belongs for all eternity."

A cry of uncontrollable horror was wrung from Yvonne's white lips as she listened to the priest's calm and dispassionate exposition of what was surely the most fiendish example of human ingenuity—if, indeed, it were human—ever conceived; but even yet her mind had scarcely grasped the appalling possibilities of the scheme, upon which the

imperturbable voice of Kishen Aiyangar, with its dry, judicial accents, now proceeded to expatiate :

" You have read much of what the woman, Yaouma, has written concerning the achievements of Set and his ministers in the past . . ." —again Yvonne started violently ; this man knew everything ! Was there then *no* secret place in her heart into which he could not intrude ?—  
" . . . and when I tell you that these were all accomplished by mere human skill and organisation, inspired, of course, by the master himself, you will realise to the full what we *now* have it in our power to do. You are young, but you are a woman of unusual intelligence, and your own reason will convince you, better than any mere words of mine, that the world is at our mercy, together with every one of its inhabitants, body and soul."

" *Mon Dieu ! Que vous êtes le diable même !*" gasped Yvonne, relapsing unconsciously into her own tongue.

The Hindu inclined his head ever so slightly. " I take that as a compliment," he said, " although I fear you exaggerate my status." A faint smile parted his lips as he noted the involuntary spasm of annoyance which crossed her face at his immediate comprehension.

" Why do you tell me all this ? " she asked, hoarsely.

" I am coming to that now," answered the priest, with deliberation. — Was it fancy, or did his voice take on a new note ? Certainly, there was a hint of unsteadiness, which hitherto had been conspicuous by its absence.

" I am telling you all this," he went on, repeating her words slowly and distinctly, as if to gain time satisfactorily to formulate his thoughts, " because I am desirous that you, and you alone, of all the world, should retain full power over your mind. You are young, you are beautiful—wonderfully beautiful—and you have found favour in my sight." There was no doubt about it ; his voice was trembling.

" Now, the fluid of which I have been speaking does not represent the limit of my discoveries ; indeed, it is a mere bagatelle beside this." He picked up a tiny phial, containing a liquid so crystal clear that at first sight she took the glass

to be empty.—“Here again, is something which has been sought since the beginning of time, the Elixir of Life. It is, it will remain, my own secret; and long after Phorenis, Nardanus and the rest are dust, I shall be ruling, Master of the World, second only to Set himself. But I have no mind to reign alone, and it is to you that I offer partnership in this wonderful destiny; only say the word, and you shall be Empress, not merely of this poor Earth, but also of other worlds, at present barely known to you Occidentals through your pitifully imperfect telescopes. Remember, it is nothing less than infinite power, infinite wealth, infinite wisdom, that I offer you, bounded only by the immutable laws of Set.”

Kishen Aiyangar ceased speaking, and his normally impassive countenance shewed unmistakable indications of suspense as he anxiously scanned the girl’s white face.

Yvonne, thrilled through and through with loathing at this foul proposal though she was, racked with stark terror at her hopeless impotence, still instinctively endeavoured to gain time. Somehow she succeeded in controlling her features, setting them in a hard mask of indifference, imperfect only in the quivering of her lips—a flaw, however, which was susceptible of more than one interpretation by the watching priest.

Schooling her voice to the same lack of all expression, she managed to ask, “And what must I do to gain all this?”

“Simply surrender yourself to me and acknowledge the supremacy of Set,” replied her tempter, relaxing slightly as, deceived by her attitude, he thought the battle half won.

Then another thought occurred to the girl. “Why,” she enquired, “should you go to so much trouble to save me from being inoculated with that yellow stuff, seeing that I must become a follower of Set in any case?”

“Because,” came the answer, “the Elixir of Life cannot operate on a body in whose veins already runs the other essence. Moreover, in order to rule, it is necessary that the brain should be whole and undefiled, not diseased as it would be if the yellow fluid had been injected. Finally,

my wife must come to me with a mind unimpaired, of her own free will ; did the poison already run in your veins, you would surrender incontinently, driven thereto by sheer animal passion, which is well enough in its way, but incomplete—damnably incomplete."

Physical nausea almost overcame the unfortunate girl, and, realising that her strength was fast failing, she recklessly abandoned all further attempt at subterfuge. Bending her limbs to her will with a mighty effort, she rose suddenly to her feet and almost screamed into the Hindu's evil face, "No ! No !! No !!! A thousand thousand million times no ! Strike me dead, if you wish ! Torture my body, an it please you ; but my soul is mine, *mine*, and I surrender it to none save God Almighty ! "

Kishen Aiyangar flinched at the Name, but only momentarily was he disconcerted. Passion deepened the darkness of his cheeks as he, too, sprang to his feet and lurched drunkenly towards the slight, swaying figure of Yvonne, splendidly defiant, even in this last extremity.

"By Set, but you *shall* surrender !" he shouted, "and that without reward. I will first take your body, and . . ."

Choking with terror, Yvonne clutched at her throat, where her plucking fingers chanced to touch the little gold cross. Scarcely knowing what she did, she gave a wild wrench, snapped the slender chain and held the holy symbol desperately before her, at the same time springing back to avoid the Hindu's eager arms.

A wild shriek, in which baffled rage mingled with hideous fear, burst from his lips, and he stopped dead. At the same instant, the door was flung open, tearing aside the curtains with it, and on the threshold stood the tall figure of the Eunuch-Priest.

For a full minute deathly silence reigned, like the hush which descends on hill and vale after the culminating outburst of some titanic storm. Passion had ebbed from Kishen Aiyangar's cheeks, leaving them a ghastly grey, whilst Yvonne, her whole body trembling uncontrollably with the sudden reaction, still fought doggedly to retain

her senses, which were on the verge of flight. Impassively, the Eunuch-Priest waited until she had recovered some measure of self-control, and it was not until returning colour in Kishen Aiyangar's face warned him that further delay was dangerous that he made a move. Stretching out his hand, he grasped the girl's wrist and swung her round towards the door, at the same time indicating unmistakably with his free arm that she was to fly. For an instant she stood, irresolute, but a slight movement on the part of the Hindu galvanised her shaking limbs into action, and she fled from that dreadful presence as if all the devils in hell were after her.

Tearing along the gallery in sheer panic-fear, she yet spared a thought for her rescuer and turned her head to see whether he were coming, but there was no sign of him. All her being rose in revolt at the idea of leaving him alone to face the terror within, as, forgetting her own extremity for the moment, she stopped to listen.

Clear and distinct in the night air, the voice of Kishen Aiyangar came to her ears, speaking in Greek, "Explain this sacrilege, Sutu!" Should she go back and try to create a diversion, so that he, too, could get away? Then she realised that he had had ample time to escape, being taller than the Hindu, and more powerful, so she once more resumed her flight, reflecting that Sutu—evidently that was his name—doubtless knew what he was about.

Through music-room and garden beyond she raced, running like the wind along the further corridor into the great central courtyard and under its surrounding colonnade to where the long passage entered the massive stone wall. So far, so good; but now she had cause bitterly to regret the wandering thoughts which had prevented her noticing the exact position of the opening into her cell, and as she ran on and on, the conviction was borne in upon her that she must have passed it.

Halting suddenly, she leaned against the wall and tried to think, but scarcely had she decided to retrace her steps than someone rounded the bend far away down the corridor through which she had come. The unknown might be

friend or foe, but she dared not risk discovery, and her only alternative was to go forward again, in the hope that she might find somewhere to hide.

Onwards she ran, gasping for breath, her feet like leaden weights chaining her to the ground, rather than a means of locomotion, but never a door or an archway met her frantic glance. To be sure, small brass levers projected from the walls here and there, but whilst these might have operated concealed doors, they might equally well have been something quite different—perhaps even connected with the electric installation. Had she only known, it was one of these very levers, long since left behind, which controlled the cell's secret entrance, but she had been too preoccupied earlier on to notice her guide's actions, and in any case she would hardly have been able to identify the particular lever without having some more definite landmark.

At length the corridor terminated in another main artery, running at right-angles in both directions. Not daring to hesitate, for a backward glance had told her that her lead was already reduced, she chose the left, dimly aware that so she would be heading away from Kishen Aiyangar. Soon several openings appeared in the left-hand wall, but they were very low and narrow, and were, moreover, in pitch darkness, so that she shrank from entering them, save as a very last resource. Besides, she had been thinking hard as she ran, and had come to the conclusion that she must now be passing behind the end of the temple where the idol was ; if this were so, it were only reasonable to assume that these narrow passages led to somewhere within the "secret places," which might contain Heaven knew what, and Yvonne felt she could not endure any further horrors just then.

Presently the fugitive came to yet another main artery, branching to the left, which she felt sure must run parallel with the main wall of the temple opposite her cell, and so lead her back to the central courtyard ; from there, perhaps, she could start again—that is to say, if her strength held out. Yvonne was no weakling, despite her slight build, and although the strain on mind and body had been terrific,

she still possessed some reserve of strength, now that her nerves were temporarily freed from the nameless terror of the supernatural. Nevertheless, although certain that her sense of direction was not at fault, she was human enough to halt doubtfully for an instant at the parting of the ways. As she did so, the man or woman behind her appeared from the other corridor and turned in her direction. That settled it ; better round the corner, in any case, for so she would remain hidden from view a while longer—if, indeed, she had not already been seen.

Surprised, and not a little dismayed, Yvonne found that the new passage did not take the straight course she had anticipated, but bore sharply to the right some thirty yards along. It was impossible to turn back now, however, and she raced on to the bend, which she rounded full into the arms of a priest, who seized and held her fast. The sight of the yellow robe was sufficient ; shriek after shriek of sheer panic-terror burst from her lips, until outraged nature broke under the strain, and oblivion engulfed her.

A sensation of warmth in her throat and a blessed coolness at her forehead heralded the return of consciousness. Yvonne opened her eyes to find Sutu bending over her, whilst all around were the familiar appointments of her cell.

Realising that it must have been he with whom she had collided, the girl's fear vanished utterly, and she managed to stand up, albeit very shakily. It was difficult to know what to do or say, but instinct led her aright. Holding out her hand with a frank gesture, she said, simply, "Thank you, Sutu."

The priest hesitated, thanks being something to which he was a stranger, let alone a friendly shake of the hand from one who, unlike himself, was not accursed—a poor, maimed remnant of humanity. Realising that the unbelievable was, nevertheless, true, he took the girl's hand in his and raised it in homage to his lips, whilst Yvonne could hardly restrain the tears which sprang to her eyes at the dog-like

devotion he evinced in return for what was, after all, a very ordinary act of gratitude.

"I shall not forget, Sutu," she went on, as well as she could for the lump that would rise in her throat; "Heaven knows if I shall ever have the chance to repay you, but if the opportunity does come . . ." She left it at that; probably he had not understood all she said, but that he had grasped the gist of it was apparent, for he knelt down and, lifting the hem of her dress, reverently kissed it. Then, as if not trusting himself further, he rose and, bowing deeply, hurriedly left the cell.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### PAUL TCHERKEV TAKES CONTROL

**I**T was an exceedingly hot and uncomfortable quartette which emerged from the pleasant quarters on Ba-Bel Rock at half-past seven on August the thirteenth, and filed wearily across to the temple of Isis, looming darkly against the evening sky in all its awe-inspiring majesty. The air had become intolerably sultry and oppressive as the day wore on, and now that dusk had fallen, the stars seemed to shimmer down through the all-pervading haze as lights seen from the bottom of a lake, whilst no breath of the usual evening breeze came to relieve the almost tangible heat, which bore like a leaden weight on European and native alike.

Silently and reverently, for the first and last time the men from the airship entered the great temple and, escorted by a white-robed priest, slowly traversed its vast, mysterious aisles to where Rames was awaiting them at the further end. There, beneath the serene, coldly beautiful countenance of the immense carven statue of Isis, goddess of an alien religion, Tony and his friends received the blessing of her High Priest on their enterprise. To none of them did it seem incongruous that they, good Christians all, should be here—almost worshippers—in a pagan fane; during the short period of their stay on Ba-Bel Rock, they had come insensibly to respect, even to reverence this ancient faith which, under the ministry of Rames, was no vain superstition, but a living, vital reality, striking deep into the hearts of men and calling forth all that was best in them. As the old man had once said, God reveals Himself in a thousand different forms to myriad races in divers climes and epochs, so what is man that he should condemn this or that manifestation as false, superstitious and the like? The principles of Isis, as enunciated by Rames and shorn of the extraneous growths which had undoubtedly defiled

them in the ancient Land of Khem, differed but little from those of Christ Himself ; how, then, should it be said that the one is evil and the other good ? Were the Egyptians damned because they knew not Christ and worshipped not Jehovah of the Jews ? Such a theory were monstrous—a blasphemous travesty of all religion, an indefensible aspersion on the justice and the love of God.

The ceremony was simple ; there were no candles, no acolytes, no bowing and scraping. Rames merely laid his hands on the bent head of each of them and spoke a few words of blessing in modern, unpretentious English, for, as he had previously declared, all languages were one to the Holy Mother, who read men's hearts and listened not to their lips.

So it ended. Rames, the High Priest, having accomplished his duty, Rames, the man, shook hands with each of them in Western fashion, and there were tears in more than one pair of eyes, a choking sensation in more than one throat, as they turned to depart on their hazardous errand of rescue and destruction—rescue of the innocent from a loathsome fate, and destruction of the devil's habitation upon earth.

Ere passing between the huge pylons guarding the temple entrance, they looked back through the quivering haze that filled its vast mysterious interior, and their last sight of Rames, Egyptian Priest and gentleman, was of a lonely white figure, infinitesimally small, bowed in prayer before the shadowy outline of Isis, the Holy Mother.

Outside on the open plateau, gathered round the aerial ropeway, a group of friends they had made during their stay waited to bid them farewell, whilst a little to one side, gazing unseeingly towards the massive blur which was Kala-Nawar, stood the forlorn and solitary figure of Myrtis. Harmachis and the men of Lar-Khan were already waiting below, it being more than time for a start to be made.

Tony detached himself from the others whilst they were exchanging farewell greetings, for Myrtis was as surely lost to him as if she were dead, and he had no heart for the companionship of his fellow-men. Some little time since,

he had confessed his trouble to Rames, and the old man, with a wider knowledge of the world than Myrtis, albeit culled from books, had gently and sympathetically, but inflexibly, pointed out to him the path of duty, from which there was no escape for anyone worthy the name of man. Tony had taken leave of Myrtis in the afternoon, and it was in his mind now to spare her the agony of a last farewell, but, even as he stood hesitant, she turned and their eyes met. All his good resolutions shattered at the sight of her drawn face, dead-white in the starlight, he strode towards her and, in an instant, her arms were twined about his neck, her lips pressed passionately to his in the bitter-sweet anguish of good-bye. Neither of them attempted to speak, for what was the use of mere words, even had sobs not choked the throats of man and girl alike. Heaven alone knew what it cost them to tear themselves apart when presently the voice of Bob was heard, loudly demanding to know the whereabouts of the "skipper." One last frantic embrace, and Tony was gone, whilst Myrtis remained standing, outwardly frozen to stone, but inwardly a battleground between pride and love—love which urged her to fly after him and plead to be allowed to go with him at any cost and in any capacity. Her lonely figure was still visible, silhouetted against the sky, when Tony looked back some time later from the narrow road leading towards the power station, and waved his hand ere disappearing from view behind some rocks. She stretched out both arms towards him and, with the movement, the battle within her was decided—pride vanquished and love triumphant.

The oppressiveness of the atmosphere was appalling, and even the Afghans were profoundly thankful that their route followed the mountain stream, whose spray served to cool the air in its immediate neighbourhood. Normally, Nawar rejoiced in a delightful climate, for always a cooling breeze caressed its heated valley at dusk, lulling rocks and fields to peaceful rest after even the most sultry day;

but to-night, for the first time within living memory, this was absent, whilst the day temperature had exceeded anything ever known there.

At length, after a weary trudge of a mile and a quarter—it seemed more like a hundred and a quarter—the road bent sharply to the right, crossing the stream by an old stone bridge, a hundred feet above the level of the waterfall which provided both Ba-Bel Rock and Kala-Nawar with power and light. On the opposite bank stood the generating station itself—a group of low buildings crowded on to a level platform some two hundred feet square, hewn out of the living rock.

Whilst the party was still on the bridge, a tall, bearded Hindu detached himself from the shadows at the further end and stood waiting. He salaamed profoundly as they came up, and, without a word, led them round the buildings to where the cliff rose sheer from the platform's inner edge. Then, pressing a lever in the face of the rock, he caused a section to swing outwards, disclosing a yawning black hole which would have been uninviting enough under ordinary circumstances, and which promised nothing short of purgatory in this terrific heat. As soon as the stone door, which moved but slowly, had opened to its fullest extent, the Hindu reached just inside the aperture and operated a switch, whereupon the tunnel was lit by a row of lamps, extending along its roof as far as eye could reach. This done, he stood back and bowed gravely, intimating by a wave of his hand that the party should proceed. One by one they stepped through the opening and, as soon as the last man was in, the stone door swung to.

"The de'il!" exclaimed Bob; "hoo dae we get oot?"

Jimmie, who was the last of the four Europeans, craned his head to look back at the door. "Well," he said, "unless there's a handle on the *inside* at the other end, we don't!"

"D'ye think 'tis a ttrap, skiperr?" asked Bob, appealing to Tony.

"I don't know," growled the latter, shortly, adding under his breath, ". . . and I don't bally well care!"

At this point, Harmachis intervened with the information that, to the best of his belief, it was customary to close this door, and that there should be a bell at the other end, by which one could warn the guard whose duty it was to work the mechanism.

Somewhat reassured, but by no means easy in their minds, the party plodded on, perspiration pouring off their bodies, and every step an effort. The floor of the tunnel sloped steadily up-hill for perhaps two hundred yards ; then came a long flight of steps, after which there was another incline, followed by more steps, and so on, until at last Tony, dead-beat, called a halt.

"How much farther have we got to go in this damned tunnel ?" he asked Harmachis, irritably.

"It is rather more than a mile long altogether, I believe," replied the priest, "but we must be nearing the end now."

"Thank Heaven for that!" muttered Tony, and, after a brief respite, gave the order to proceed.

Harmachis turned out to be right, for, some fifty yards further on, they came to a short flight of steps, terminating at the top in a stone door. Let into the rock on the right was an ordinary bell-push, and scarcely had Tony removed his finger from this, than the slab in front of them swung slowly outwards, letting in the night air, which was but very little fresher than that of the tunnel. A challenge rang out as Tony stepped into the open. Heart in mouth, he gave the password, "Thoth." The guard, who was standing at the ready a little to one side of the entrance, said something in a language which the Englishman did not understand, but, guessing from the tone that it was permission to proceed, he moved forward to make way for the others. One by one they emerged, each challenged in his turn, until all were assembled ; thereupon the sentry reached into the tunnel, switched off the lights and closed the opening.

They were now within the outer courtyard of the fort, and straight ahead loomed the tower at its north-east corner, from which the massive walls of the building receded into the darkness on either hand. A hurried glance at the stars

having satisfied Tony as to his bearings, he led the way forward to the tower and then followed along the east wall for some two hundred yards, scrutinising it carefully for any signs of an opening. The eastern entrance, when at last it was reached, proved to be merely a small iron door—one that might easily have been overlooked, and vastly different from the gigantic portico which formed the main entrance to the fort on the north.

It stood open and Tony was challenged as he crossed the threshold, but the magic word, "Thoth," once more removed all difficulty, and in less than a minute his party was filing along a narrow corridor in the heart of the eastern wall. The interior of the fort did not seem so hot as the open air or the tunnel, but its atmosphere was nevertheless indescribably oppressive, and the brooding stillness, broken only by their echoing footsteps, exercised a morbid influence on their minds, accentuating the weariness of their aching limbs.

The corridor was electrically lit, so that Tony was able to consult his plan, but he was careful to conceal it as far as possible in the palm of his hand, in case anybody should emerge unexpectedly from one of the many passages branching off to their right. They met no one, however, and, about four hundred yards from the entrance, the main corridor itself turned sharply to the right, disclosing another apparently interminable stretch. This new passage ran parallel with the great cliff against which the southern wall was built, and they followed it for a short distance only, eventually turning off to the left down a narrower turning. A few yards along, there came a change in the character of the walls, which no longer consisted of regular stone courses, but of hewn rock, rubbed smooth by the shoulders of countless generations.

Again they were challenged, but this time the sentry made no reply to the password, merely saluting smartly and turning to lead the way. It was, indeed, just as well that Tcherkev had made such a provision, for, plan or no plan, it would have puzzled any stranger to find his way amidst the intricate maze of passages through which they

were now being conducted. The journey seemed never-ending, whilst here, in the heart of the mountain, the heat was more intolerable than any they had yet experienced, so that every man-jack of them, native and European alike, was devoutly thankful when at last their guide stopped before an iron door and signed that it should be opened.

Tony inserted one of the keys—the right one, as it happened—and entered, whilst the remainder of the party with one accord subsided on to the floor of the passage, where they lay in various stages of collapse, gasping for breath.

Inside the cell, a short, spare individual was walking restlessly to and fro, puffing furiously at a cigarette. He came to a halt as Tony appeared, and, nodding in answer to the latter's enquiry, "Monsieur Paul Tcherkev?" held out his hand.

"My name is Netherley—Captain Netherley," said Tony; "there are three other Europeans with me, besides a priest and twenty native soldiers. We are at your disposal, Monsieur."

"Good," replied Tcherkev; "then we will have your friends in here, if you please. The priest had better come, too, but the natives can wait outside."

As soon as the others had crowded into the confined space and been introduced, the Russian came straight to the point in a business-like manner which they could not but admire, however unprepossessing they might find the man himself.

"Our first duty, gentlemen," he said, "is to release a lady imprisoned in these dungeons. She is, I think, daughter to the—er—somewhat irascible gentleman who appears to be leader of the airship's survivors. Rosalind is her Christian name,—no doubt you know to whom I refer."

"Yes; that would be Miss Harris," replied Tony; "what is she doing in a dungeon?"

Tcherkev's cynical smile was again in evidence as he answered, quite oblivious of the bombshell-effect his remark would produce, "She was indiscreet enough to love an

Englishman whom Queen Phorenis singled out for her own special property."

"What?" gasped Tony; "why, the Queen has never even seen me!"

Tcherkev looked puzzled. "You, Monsieur?" he queried; "but is she also in love with you?"

"'Also'"—Tony seized on the word—"look here, Monsieur Tcherkev, let's get this right; we are evidently at cross-purposes. The lady is supposed to be engaged to me. What is the name of the man to whom you refer?"

The Russian shrugged his shoulders and smiled deprecatingly. "I seem to have put my foot in it, as you English say," he replied, "but you are bound to learn the truth now, so I may as well tell you. His name is Alan Merton."

"Th' dairrty dog!" exclaimed Bob; "hoo was *he* ta knew ye were i' love wi' Myrtis?"

"H'm. How did *you* know it?" murmured Tony, drily, and then, turning to Tcherkev, "Monsieur, as it happens, you have done me a service, so please do not distress yourself."

"I am charmed," responded the Russian, in a tone which plainly indicated that he did not care a button, whilst Tony, who had turned his head away, was conscious of but one thought drumming through his mind, "My God! If I had only known!"

"Now, gentlemen, we have talked enough," said Tcherkev, briskly; "it is time we acted. You have brought explosives?"

"Yes; blasting powder," replied Tony, pulling himself together at the mention of action.

"Good. Now my plan is this: As soon as we have set Miss Harris free, we go to the temple of the god, Set, which is an integral part of the fort, and is reached by corridors. But no doubt you have studied the map I sent?" The others nodded, and Tcherkev went on, "Very well, then, you know that there is a network of passages at the southern end of the temple, where the god stands. From these, it is possible to get right inside the idol, which I propose to

mine ; then, at a given signal, we fire the charge and, in the ensuing confusion, rush the hall. The explosion will certainly kill or put out of action most of the priests, who will be grouped at that end of the temple, whilst the Queen and your own people should be comparatively safe, since they will be farther off. The Captain of the Guard is on our side, and I have a sprinkling of adherents amongst the soldiers who will be present on duty, but there are not enough of them to overpower the rest without the help of some such diversion as I propose. For purposes of identification, each of them has a white band, which he will slip over his left arm immediately the explosion occurs. Then, once we have the upper hand, these men will be sufficiently numerous to enable me to keep it ; as soon as you see the enemy is beaten, therefore, collect your own people and get away—there will be nothing to wait for, and delay might be dangerous."

Tony nodded approval. " Sounds quite all right," he commented, " but could you not have carried the whole thing through on your own, without bothering about us ? "

" No," replied Tcherkev, " or you may be sure I should have done so, since I am no philanthropist. It is the Queen I am after, and I don't care a rap what happens to any of you, once you have ceased to be of use to me. You see, I had no explosives, because the only keys to the magazine are in the possession of Nardanus and Phorenis, whilst the blasting powder which was on the airship had disappeared before I could get hold of it. I therefore concluded it must have been taken to Ba-Bel, my spies having informed me that Rames had some of you up there."

Tony's eyebrows rose expressively. " So *you* knew there was blasting powder on the ' Britain ' ; that's odd ! *I* didn't ! "

The Russian smiled. " Quite so," he murmured ; " it was in Dr. Radocek's baggage."

" Oh ! The devil it was ! This Dr. Radocek seems to have been a man of many parts."

" He was," agreed Tcherkev, drily ; " but we must not stay to discuss him now. Do you go and release Miss Harris

—the sentry will take you to her cell—and meanwhile Harmachis can explain to his Afghans what they are to do."

With very little liking for his task, and wondering what on earth he was going to say to her, Tony followed the sentry. His hand trembled as he inserted a key in the door pointed out to him. Slowly it swung open, and the next moment he heard his name cried in a voice in which incredulity was mingled with consternation, relief and half-a-dozen other emotions.

Looking little the worse for her incarceration, Rosalind stood before him, undecided what to do or say, evidently feeling that she ought to rush into his arms, but at the same time shrinking instinctively from the hypocrisy of such a proceeding. Tony, possessing the key to her attitude, experienced a mild amusement, not unmixed with the feeling that she deserved to be uncomfortable. This was unjust, but then, he did not know all, and he could not forget that it was because of his loyalty to her, who had not been loyal to him, that he had lost Myrtis. However, to revenge himself by keeping her in ignorance of the fact that she could be free would be "playing it rather low down," and he cast about for words in which to convey the information.

How to begin—that was the problem; but Rosalind, who herself had no use for humbug, gave him the cue.

"Tony," she said, in a low voice, "I thought you were dead."

"So Alan was the next best?"—He could not resist the gibe.

"Don't, Tony," she begged, clutching the lapels of his coat; "I fought against it—so did Alan, for that matter. We knew it was disloyal to you, although of course we were both convinced you had been killed. I—I—oh, forgive me, Tony—I know now that I never really cared—I don't know what I was about—I must have been mad. Oh, Tony—" Rosalind buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Gently he disengaged them, holding them in his whilst he told her in a few terse sentences the truth of the

whole miserable business ; it was kindest, for then she would know that she was not buying her own happiness at the expense of his. Myrtis he did not mention—not from any desire to hide his own delinquencies, but in order not to add remorse and self-reproach to the humiliation under which Rosalind was already smarting.

"Come ! " he said at last ; " we must be getting along, or Tcherkev's plans will be upset, and with them our only hope of escape." Without waiting for a reply, Tony turned abruptly on his heel and quitted the cell, leaving her to follow. Impolite, but necessary, in order to avoid being bombarded with questions about what they were going to do, how they were going to do it, and a hundred other variations on the same theme. Enough time had already been lost, and Tcherkev was fuming when they eventually reached his cell.

With a curt " Come along ! " the Russian took his place behind the sentry who was acting as guide, and the party moved off once more through the intricate maze of passages back into the fort itself. The building reached, they turned to the left along the main corridor, and within a few minutes were negotiating a narrow passage in the heart of one of two great buttresses, forty-five feet thick, which projected a hundred feet into the Temple of Set at its southern end. In the space between these buttresses, itself forty-five feet across, stood the huge idol, whose interior was reached by a tortuous branch passage.

Tcherkev brought the party to a standstill at the entrance to this and turned to Tony. " Inside the idol is a corkscrew staircase, leading up to the eyes, through which one can look into the temple. As you will eventually have to guide your friends out of the place, you had better reconnoitre whilst we lay the mine."

" Right-oh ! " agreed Tony ; " only don't put the jolly old match to it whilst I am up there. So long, you chaps ! "

The way led down a short, steep flight of steps and along a winding tunnel to the foot of the corkscrew staircase, of which Tcherkev had spoken. Tony had not mounted many steps of this structure before he was heartily wishing

that one of the others had been given the job, for although the place was ventilated in some way, the temperature of the current of air sweeping up through the hollow centre of the idol was appalling, and seemed to be rising every moment. The stairs seemed endless, and it was fortunate that there was a hand-rail, for, long before he reached the top, Tony had to hang on with all his might in order to take the intolerable strain off his legs. He literally crawled on all fours up the last few steps, finally collapsing full-length on the broad platform at the top, utterly exhausted.

For some minutes he lay, panting for breath, his lungs nearly bursting with the effort to absorb sufficient air. Indeed, it was almost as though his head were enveloped in a thick blanket, and dimly Tony wondered whether he would ever get back, or whether sheer absence of muscular strength would result in his pitching headlong down the well, should he attempt to descend.

Slowly breath returned and, by dint of holding on to every likely projection, he at last managed to haul himself upright and look round for the spy-holes.

The idol was not hollow in the sense he had expected ; rather did it consist of an apparently solid mass of stone with a vertical bore up the middle, and Tony wondered just how Tcherkev expected to shift it with a mere handful of blasting powder. However, the Russian was decidedly not a fool, and Tony had no time to waste on idle speculation concerning someone else's part in this pretty little plot. At first, he could not tell which was the front of the head, but presently he espied a short iron ladder leading to a hole in the rock ; somehow he managed to clamber up and wriggle into this hole, which was the entrance of a tunnel just large enough to admit his body. He crawled along for some distance until suddenly, after rounding a sharp bend, he was confronted with a blaze of light from two small windows, some distance apart, in one of the walls.

Gingerly raising his head to the nearest window, Tony found he was looking down into the temple itself. He drew back involuntarily, fearing to be seen, but a moment's reflection reminded him that he himself was in darkness and therefore

invisible to anyone on the lighted side of the window, even a few feet away, so he looked again and calmly made mental notes of all that was to be seen.

The spectacle presented to his eyes was the most wonderful and overwhelmingly impressive he had ever had the good or evil fortune to behold. He was gazing down the length of a vast temple, at least two hundred yards long and one hundred wide, surrounded by a colonnade of magnificently-carved and gilded pillars, which partly screened the hieroglyph-covered walls behind. In the centre of the marble floor was a fountain, set in the midst of an oblong basin thirty yards long by fifteen wide ; it was spouting some red fluid, whose drops sparkled like rubies in the blaze of light with which the temple was filled, and Tony wondered whether it were wine. He felt the heat even more intensely as this thought occurred to him, and it was with a regretful sigh that he resumed his reconnaissance. At the far end of the temple was a double row of columns and, beyond these, the wide open space of the fort's inner courtyard ; straight ahead, on the far side of the latter, was another blaze of light, illuminating a titanic colonnade which led to the northern or main entrance of the building. His way of escape was therefore plain beyond possibility of error, and as for human obstacles, they could be dealt with as they arose.

Returning to the temple itself, Tony saw, immediately beneath him, serried ranks of priests and priestesses, robed in bright yellow—the former on his left and the latter on the right. At the far end, in more or less orderly rows and with a wide gangway down the middle, squatted a miscellaneous crowd of people—evidently ordinary worshippers of one sort or another—whilst between each two of the gigantic columns surrounding the place was stationed a soldier.

Seated on a golden throne immediately in front of the fountain was a woman, on either side of whom were clusters of men and women in gorgeous robes of every hue under the sun, save yellow. "Evidently Phorenis herself," thought Tony ; "that fellow Tcherkev doesn't want

much!—Well, it's not my business"—and his eyes strayed to the space between fountain and colonnade on the right, where were grouped those he had come to rescue, easily distinguishable by the sombreness of their attire.

Some ceremony was already going on, but Tony had seen enough for his purpose, so judging it about time to be returning, he wriggled backwards along the tunnel and clambered down to the platform. Wringing wet with perspiration and feeling "just a solid chunk of misery tied up in clothes," he at length reached the foot of the corkscrew staircase, where his friends were putting finishing touches to the mine.

Tcherkev had filched from somewhere a big coil of insulated wire, which he had hitched up to the lighting circuit at a convenient point, in order to fire the charge from a distance. Apparently the idol was not so solid as Tony had thought, for there was a space between the walls of the staircase and those forming the actual body, into which ingress was possible by crawling through a short tunnel. Several charges had been inserted into holes already drilled half-way through the fore part of the creature's legs and also higher up, in the region of the stomach, so that evidently this scheme of Tcherkev's was no new thing—as, indeed, he admitted. Wires had been laid to each of these points, and Bob was now engaged in connecting them all up in one circuit, whilst Tcherkev was trailing the main pair back through the passage by which they had entered.

Harmachis and his Afghans had been sent round to the far end of the temple itself, with orders to station themselves at convenient points amongst the crowd. This left only the Europeans, who, as soon as Bob had finished his job, returned to the main corridor, unrolling the coil of wire as they went.

"Suppose somebody comes along and spots the wires?" asked Jimmie, suddenly.

The Russian shook his head. "It's as much as the life of anyone in the fort is worth to be absent from one of these feasts," he said, "—that is, unless they are on guard duty, or something of that kind. And now, gentlemen,

please speak only in whispers, if speak you must, for in a moment you will be within earshot of the enemy."

He had been leading them along a corridor which ran parallel with the length of the temple, and, stopping short as he spoke, pointed to a row of doors on their left. "These are disused cells," he said, "and each of them has another exit on the far side, leading into the temple itself. The doors are provided with gratings, through which you can see what is going on. Now, one man in each cell, please; then as soon as the explosion occurs, get into the temple, settle the soldier immediately in front of you, and make for your friends. Miss Harris, you had better go with Captain Netherley."

Tcherkev waited until they were all in, and then chose a cell himself, trailing the wires after him. The cells were quite roomy, but it would not have done for the whole party to crowd into one of them, since the doors leading into the temple were too narrow for more than one person to pass at a time.

A casual inspection showed that their position could not have been more favourable. They were situated half-way down the long wall of the temple, directly opposite the fountain, and on the same side as the airship's survivors.

Since Tony had surveyed the scene from the idol's head, a table had been brought out and stood some yards in front of the Queen. By its side stood a dark-skinned man in the sacerdotal yellow, fingering various instruments which lay thereon, and the Englishman had great difficulty in stifling a cry of horror and rage as he caught sight of the familiar figure of Yvonne being dragged, struggling violently, towards these sinister preparations.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE FEAST OF THE NEW MOON

**A**BOUT the same time as twenty-five shrouded figures were filing silently into Kala-Nawar through the carelessly-guarded eastern entrance, Yvonne, lying limply on her couch, was startled by a sudden blaze of light, which burst in through the grating and cast great bars of shadow on the opposite wall of her cell. Almost immediately afterwards, she thought she heard the splash of falling water, and so intense had been the heat all day that the very sound seemed to possess a refreshing quality. Forgetting for a moment the weakness and languor engendered by the steadily increasing oppressiveness of the atmosphere, she almost ran to the grating, where there might be a chance of benefiting by the spray-cooled air round the fountain.

Not once since her incarceration had the temple been fully lit, and the magnificence of the sight which now met her eyes, even limited as it was by the grating, extorted a gasp of wonderment. Everywhere, what she had taken for stone was marble, brass turned out to be gleaming gold, and points of colour in the mural decorations were jewels, many of them of amazing size and purity.

The splashing sound which had aroused her indeed came from the fountain, but the liquid spouting from a dozen cunningly-concealed vents round the statue's feet, and gushing forth from a pitcher in the skilfully-moulded hand, was not water. It was wine—wine, which glittered and sparkled like rubies in the blaze of light from above—wine, whose breath caressed her nostrils with an almost overpowering fragrance.

Here and there priests and priestesses moved slowly about their office, wearing, in addition to the familiar yellow robe, a narrow circlet of gold, fashioned in the

form of a serpent, with head uplifted and fangs ready to strike.

At the end of the fountain nearest the altar stood now a wonderful golden throne, its seat and arms draped in purple. From the direction of the entrance, i.e., away on the left, came an incessant murmuring which struck a curiously familiar note, and Yvonne's brows drew together in a puzzled frown ; then she realised of what it reminded her—the low, but insistent hum of conversation which fills a theatre before the rise of the curtain. Craning painfully, she was just able to see that the source of the noise was identical ; a vast concourse of people, of which only the foremost ranks were visible, filled the whole of that end of the temple and was hemmed in by native soldiers with fixed bayonets, stationed every few yards. Then came a steady tramp, as more troops filed past and halted further along ; a single word of command, and every man marched to his appointed place midway between two pillars of the colonnade surrounding the temple.

The manoeuvre was still in progress when again the tramp of feet was heard—confused this time, and irregular. No soldiers these, no impressive column of armed men marching in orderly array, but a sad and dismal procession, trailing up the temple, the dark European clothes of the men and women who composed it lending an added note of gloom to their already sombre mien.

Her friends ! Oh, if only she could warn them of the dreadful fate awaiting them, convey to them in some way the ghastly truth, of which they had as yet no inkling ! Still, what good would it do ? How could they, a handful of unarmed Christians, prevail against this heathen multitude, let alone contend with the soldiery ? For herself, she did not care so much, and, indeed, she already had some glimmerings of a desperate plan to save herself from being inoculated with that horrible poison. Perhaps, if it succeeded, she could save them, too ; she knew what the stuff was, whereas they did not, and it was up to her to "do her damnedest," as "*le pauvre Colonel Matthieson*" would have said. Kishen Aiyangar would probably not

be expecting serious difficulty with a woman, and surely her ready wit would find means to turn his devilries against himself ; she would watch his preparations carefully and lay her plans in accordance with what she saw,—if necessary sacrificing herself to save the rest. Then a horrible thought occurred to her ; supposing he dealt with the others first ! In that case, nothing she could do would be of any avail, and England would welcome back with open arms men and women who were—what ?

Yvonne's musings were interrupted by the silvery tones of a trumpet, and a deathly hush fell over all, the sudden silence filling that vast space with a sinister suggestion of damnable mystery, half-revealing the brooding presence of nameless powers of darkness in unnumbered array. Again the trumpet sounded, and a glittering procession of nobles and courtiers in silken raiment, headed by the Queen, filed past. Phorenis, who was robed in purple and silver, made obeisance towards the altar before ascending the throne, her example being followed by the others, who then grouped themselves on either side of her.

Yvonne began to wonder whether she were to be left in the cell, but even as the possibility, with all its involved for her friends, began to enter the domain of the probable, Sutu appeared and led her forth. For some unknown reason, she was not allowed to join the others, but was placed on the outskirts of the group of nobles to the right of the throne, Sutu remaining on guard. Now that her field of vision was no longer circumscribed by the grating, she could see the great altar at the far end, and behind it the titanic figure of Set, upon whose sculptured countenance fell a glare of light so cunningly directed that it seemed no longer an inanimate block of stone, but a living face, whose every feature, every line, and every contour spoke of evil incarnate, deadly sin born in the nethermost pits of a hell inconceivable.

On either side of the altar, to right and left respectively, were massed ranks of priests and priestesses, whilst Nardanus stood alone in the centre, facing the god. Presently, from a side-door at the far end, appeared four

priests, bearing a table on which could be seen an array of instruments and flasks, prominent amongst the latter being one containing the devilish stuff with which the prisoners' brains were to be poisoned. Behind the bearers, keeping a careful watch on their precious burden, marched Kishen Aiyangar himself, insignificant, and yet terrifying as ever. The table duly set down some little distance in front of the Queen, he dismissed the four priests and stood beside it, waiting impassively.

These slow and methodical preparations were telling heavily on the nerves of the prospective victims—as no doubt was intended—and Yvonne was not the only one to feel a sense of relief when at last Nardanus gave signs of life and initiated the proceedings. Bowing thrice before the god, he faced about and walked with great deliberation towards the throne, where he made a similar obeisance to Phorenis.

"All is in readiness, O Queen," he announced, in Greek; "I propose first to deal with the spies, and then to proceed with the celebration of the Feast."

Phorenis looked searchingly at the sombre group of Europeans, glancing keenly from face to face. "Where is the woman I cast into prison?" she said at last; "I do not see her."

"She cannot be found, O Queen," he replied, with evident uneasiness.

"What meanest thou, priest?" thundered the Queen; "*cannot be found?* Art drunken with the magic wine of Set, or with the potions of yon Hindu?"

"Neither, O Queen," retorted Nardanus; "I know only that the dungeon wherein the woman was immured is empty, and that the door was found wide open. I would also humbly crave permission to remind the Queen that the Captain of her Guard is responsible for the safe keeping of prisoners—not I."

"True, oh innocent Nardanus," replied Phorenis, sarcastically, but somewhat mollified, none the less; "Jamnadas Neewanjee!"

The Captain of the Guard stepped out from amongst

the nobles, and saluted. If he were at all perturbed, he gave no sign of it, merely waiting passively for his royal mistress' next words.

"Knowest thou ought of this matter, Jamnadas Neewanjee?" she asked, sternly enough, but without the vicious spleen with which everything she said to Nardnaus was charged.

"No, O Queen," replied the soldier; "the woman was in her dungeon an hour agone."

Phorenis shewed plainly that she was uneasy, now glancing uncertainly over the group of prisoners, then peering keenly at one or another of the bewildered nobles, whilst ever and anon her eyes came to rest on the sculptured face of Set, as if seeking inspiration. Her worst enemy could not have called her coward, but there was assuredly some cause for disquiet, for never had such a thing been known in Kala-Nawar. Apparently deciding that, if anyone present were concerned in the matter, he was too good an actor to betray himself to casual scrutiny, the Queen dismissed Jamnadas Neewanjee, remarking that she would conduct investigations personally after the Feast.

Then, addressing herself to Sir James, she asked if he were still of the same mind in regard to being deprived of his memory.

The Baronet stated curtly that he was.

"The alternative is death," Phorenis reminded him, whereupon he shrugged his shoulders, but made no further comment.

Seeing that there was nothing more to be got out of him, she asked at large whether all were of the same mind.

Yvonne's lips curled with contempt as two shaky "Noes" quavered forth, and two men separated themselves from the rest. One was the Rev. Tobias Lawson, the other, Archibald Harris, and the French girl's gorge rose as she recollect ed that the latter had actually dared to cast covetous eyes upon her. Faugh! He deserved all he got, and she was not a bit sorry for him.

"It is well," commented the Queen, contemptuously,

"we will deal with the cowards first." Then, pointing to the Reverend Tobias, she snapped, "You!"

The wretched man advanced slowly towards the throne, glancing this way and that in a hunted manner, whilst his limbs shook visibly. His progress was much too slow for Phorenis, who signed to a near-by soldier; the latter promptly made for the shivering victim, whom he seized unceremoniously by the scruff of the neck and yanked forward, dumping him in a heap at the Hindu's feet.

It was all over in a flash. Kishen Aiyangar picked up an ordinary hypodermic syringe in which was already some of the yellow fluid, and, with a movement so rapid that the eyes could hardly follow it, made an injection just above the wrist.

The Rev. Tobias uttered a piercing shriek, probably of terror rather than pain, and remained prostrate on the floor, whereupon the soldier dragged him upright and marched him back to the others, who shrank aside in disgust. Yvonne could just see the victim's face from where she stood, and it seemed to her over-excited imagination that there were already signs of degradation; where before the features had been merely vacuous and weak, surely now they were assuming an expression similar to that possessed by all the inhabitants of Nawar with whom she had come into contact, except Jamnadas Neewanjee and Sutu. Telling herself that she must be mistaken, and that no injection, however potent, could possibly act in such a short space of time, the girl looked away for a moment before scrutinising him further. Still she was unable to decide, and took herself to task for being so incredulous; certainly the Reverend Lawson no longer shivered and shook; indeed, he seemed to be standing more stiffly upright than she had ever seen him, but —. Faugh! The man was not worth a single thought and, dismissing him from her mind, Yvonne fell to observing the behaviour of Archibald Harris, who had just been summoned by the Queen's terribly monosyllabic "You!"

The young cad did not move immediately, terror having

robbed him of the power of locomotion. Before the soldier could come to his "assistance," however, Sir James had shouldered Colonel Matthieson aside and, planting himself immediately behind his son, gave that individual a terrific and well-directed kick, which landed the recipient on all fours nearly half-way to the throne.

"Bravo, Sir James!" muttered Yvonne under her breath, whilst even the Queen smiled in grim approbation. Noticing the expression, the former could not help thinking that there was something not altogether unattractive about this devil-queen, fiend though she might be; at least Phorenis had no use for either humbug or cowardice, and one rather wondered what a woman with any good qualities at all was doing "in that galley," as an Englishman would have phrased it.

Yvonne was, however, left little time for contemplation of the Queen's qualities, good or otherwise, for she suddenly found her own eyes being drawn towards Kishen Aiyangar by a force she was powerless to resist. Archibald had been picked up by the soldier and dumped at the feet of the Hindu priest, who, once he had secured Yvonne's attention, looked significantly several times alternately at her and at the cowering youth. Without knowing how the information came to her, she suddenly realised that Kishen Aiyangar believed Archibald to be her lover, and therefore an obstacle to his own desires. No sooner had she become convinced of this than the priest acted. Somewhat more deliberately this time, he picked up a syringe, which he purposely handled in such a manner that she could see the colour of the liquid within; it was *not* yellow! Then, with the same swift movement as before, he bent down and made an injection.

Almost simultaneously Archibald gave a wild scream, leapt to his feet and tried to run, clutching frantically at his arm. He only succeeded in tottering a few steps before collapsing once more to the ground, where he writhed for a few seconds, uttering shriek after shriek, until his body gave a final twist and lay still.

Scarcely had the tumultuous echoes of those terrible

cries died away than the Queen was on her feet, towering majestically over the assembly in awful rage. "What is this, Kishen Aiyangar?" she thundered; "who gave thee permission to kill that man?"

"I decided to kill him," replied the Hindu, imperturbably.

For a moment it seemed that Phorenis would have an apoplectic fit at the calm insolence of the priest, but she managed to bring out the one word, "Why?" in a choking voice.

Kishen Aiyangar made no attempt to answer, but a movement of his eyes, which rested inadvertently for an instant upon Yvonne, gave him away.

The Queen looked round, her ungovernable rage succeeded by a dreadful calm which was even more terrifying.

"I understand," she said, adding with a wave of the hand towards the luckless Yvonne, "Thou shalt now administer the same poison to yonder woman."

Even the imperturbable Hindu started; he had not anticipated this result of his jealousy, and for a moment seemed inclined to protest. Thinking better of it, however, he waited impassively whilst the girl—who, deliberately and of set purpose, struggled violently—was dragged towards him. Whether he had any plan in his mind for saving Yvonne or not will never be known, for at that moment a blinding sheet of flame burst from the figure of the god, followed by a nerve-shattering roar as base and middle were rent asunder, whilst head and trunk crashed headlong into the ruins. Two columns and a portion of roof at the end of the temple fell, annihilating the few priests and priestesses who had not been killed outright by the explosion. A flying splinter struck Nardanus on the back of the head and killed him instantly; he pitched forward against Kishen Aiyangar's table, which capsized with a crash, distributing its diabolical burden in a thousand pieces over the floor.

Wild confusion reigned amidst the dense smoke which filled the air, and terror-stricken courtiers and soldiers

fled screaming in all directions. Meantime, whilst yet the destruction of the god was being re-enacted by a thousand deafening echoes, Tony's voice was heard shouting "In you go, boys!" followed by a stentorian yell of "Scotland for ever!" from Bob Maconochie.

Firing was going on in half-a-dozen different places, and a horrid medley of shrieks and groans, interspersed with native war-cries, shattered the reeling air, adding pandemonium to hell-let-loose.

Yvonne's captors had fled when the explosion occurred, and she dived into the press of panic-filled nobles in a frantic endeavour to rejoin her friends, but Kishen Aiyangar, who also had kept his head, was too quick for her. Half-way across the temple, where the crowd was less dense, she was stunned by a blow from behind and knew no more.

Meanwhile, Bob had fought his way through to where he had last seen her, and de St. Launeuc was also searching frantically in the blinding smoke. They both saw Kishen Aiyangar at the same moment, heading towards the main exit with the inanimate form of Yvonne slung over his shoulder, and they made a simultaneous dive at him from opposite directions. How it happened, neither ever knew, but somehow he slipped from between them, and their heads came together with a crash. They dropped to the floor, half-stunned, and by the time their scattered senses returned, their quarry had completely disappeared.

Joining forces, they raced down the now rapidly emptying temple and plunged into the crowd surging round the main exit, through which the majority of their friends had already departed, but when at last they succeeded in stamping and fighting a way through to the courtyard, there was no sign of Kishen Aiyangar or his burden. Neither they nor he had seen a tall figure in a yellow robe silently following in his wake and mercilessly felling, with a single blow of a powerful fist, all who dared offer opposition.

It is an almost invariable weakness of autocrats, even of

the most efficient, that they rarely make provision for their own disappearance from the scene, and there seems to exist a sort of perverse rule of nature that, failing such deliberate provision, nobody is ever at hand to seize the helm. In Kala-Nawar there had always been a High Priest and a Monarch, figuring as co-autocrats, and, whether by a special dispensation of Set or merely through temporary suspension of the law of averages, at least one of them had always been efficient. For this reason, the government had never been in serious danger, whilst now the possibility was even more remote, since both Phorenis and Nardanus knew their business.

Paul Tcherkev's plan was, therefore, doubly risky, for had either of the autocrats remained on the scene after the first few minutes, that one would have regained control of the panic-stricken troops, who far outnumbered the rebels, and the tables might have been turned. As things were, the Russian had extraordinary luck, inasmuch as Nardanus was killed instantly, and that without human agency—ever an uncertain quantity. Rames would have seen in the incident a direct intervention of Isis, and perhaps he would have been right; who knows?

As for Phorenis, immediately the explosion occurred, she was seized from behind by two disaffected nobles, who conveyed her, struggling violently, from the place. To do Paul Tcherkev justice, he would not have subjected her to this indignity had there been any other way, but he knew her capabilities too well to chance leaving her free for a second longer than could be helped.

With Queen and High Priest both out of action before the bewildered multitude could possibly grasp the situation, even had they kept their heads, the fight was a walk-over, no serious resistance being offered from any quarter. Colonel Matthieson saw his chance even before Tony's "In you go, boys!" apprised him that actual rescue was being attempted; he immediately took command of the prisoners, and for once Sir James made no effort to dispute the title. Bawling, "Collar their guns!" with the full force of his powerful lungs, the Colonel himself

set the example by tripping up a flying soldier and relieving the man of rifle and ammunition-pouches. Within a very short space of time, nearly all the men of the party secured weapons in the same manner and, surrounding the women in a compact body, began to fight their way to the main exit.

Leaving Bob and de St. Launeuc to look after Yvonne, Tony and Jimmie Matthieson made use of the way cleared by the Colonel's mass tactics to get into touch with the men of Lar-Khan, who were dealing with the common people. Meanwhile, Jamnadas Neewanjee, acting under orders from Tcherkev, was posted on the throne itself, whence he directed those of his own troops who were in the plot.

Seeing that victory was complete and the situation well in hand, the Russian shouted to his allies to get clear and withdraw as many of the Afghans as they liked. Nothing loath, Tony, who, with Jimmie, was now in the thick of the crowd, collected half-a-dozen of the nearest men of Lar-Khan and, telling Harmachis to keep the rest as a personal bodyguard, started for the entrance, which had once more become blocked. There had just been time in the first place to shout hurried directions to Colonel Matthieson, but he was not at all sure whether they had been understood, and consequently was extremely anxious to get into touch once more with the main body.

In spite of the intense heat, which was growing more intolerably oppressive every minute, he rushed his men across the courtyard at top speed and through the magnificent colonnade leading to the grand entrance. Here he found Bob and the Frenchman conducting a hopelessly unequal fight against many times their number of soldiers, who were led by a Hindu officer ; their backs against the wall, the two white men were putting up a magnificent fight, but sheer weight of numbers had already begun to tell when Tony's force arrived on the scene. It was the work of a few seconds to turn the tables completely, in spite of the fact that the men of Nawar still had a slight numerical advantage, but the glow of satisfaction with

which Tony surveyed the survivors as they cringed against the wall was speedily turned to horror and dismay when Bob informed him, in anguished accents, that Yvonne had been carried off.

Any attempt to search the whole of the fort would be an utterly hopeless proposition, and yet who knew but what Kishen Aiyangar and his victim were still somewhere within? He might have taken one of a dozen different passages leading from the courtyard, although, on the other hand, it was more probable that he would try to get right away, seeing that he could have no inkling of their plans. Fortunately Kamram, one of the Afghans, was able to set their minds at rest; grasping what was toward, he interrogated the prisoners at the point of his bayonet and elicited the information that a priest had passed through the main entrance a short while before, carrying a white woman over his shoulder.

"Come on, then!" commanded Tony, as soon as Kamram had translated; "don't bother with those men. Let 'em go."

Perspiring from every pore, their breath coming in great gasps and the leaden atmosphere pressing like a dead weight on their aching heads, the little band raced across the wide paved space between the main entrance and the first of the outer walls, which they passed without meeting anyone. The ground beyond descended in a succession of steep terraces, broken here and there by flights of steps, to the second wall, which was about a furlong distant. Here they found another squad of soldiers, who incontinently fled at their approach. Kamram managed to seize one, however, and by the same method of questioning, ascertained that Kishen Aiyangar had passed the gate, and, moreover, that he had at least ten minutes' start of Colonel Matthieson's party.

Without further delay, Tony's force started off down a precipitous flight of steps which, hugging the edge of the lake, descended nine thousand feet to the village of Narsan within a distance of some three miles. Not a breath of air stirred and the night was pitch dark, whilst heavy

clouds obscured the stars and a sort of steamy mist enveloped the earth. Fortunately, the latter was not sufficiently dense to make descent dangerous, the light colour of the rock rendering the steps easily visible; but speed was impossible in such a place, quite apart from the heat, which was overcoming even the Afghans.

For the first three-quarters-of-a-mile, nothing could be seen on their right but bare rock, whilst a mere hand-rail guarded the drop to the lake on their left. Presently, what appeared to be gardens on a grand scale replaced the rocky slope, whilst here and there winding paths led off from platforms which broke the descent at intervals. Had the priest taken one of these paths? It was at least possible, but there was absolutely no means of ascertaining, and even Bob and de St. Launeuc, frantic though they were, agreed that it would be wiser to go straight on to the village, where information might be obtainable.

Half-way down, contact was established with the rear of Colonel Matthieson's party, reeling with fatigue and caring little if a sudden lurch carried them over the edge of the precipice into the waters of Lake Nawar, which would at least be cool. The steps were wide, so that passing presented no difficulty, but Tony, noticing the exhausted condition of those in front, wisely chose the outer edge. The rear of the procession was brought up by a few of the men, armed with rifles, their duty being to guard against surprise; fortunately, Tony had given a hail as soon as they hove in sight, for, hearing footsteps behind, they had already faced about and were taking aim up the steps.

Next in front came the women, each supported on either side by a man, but, in spite of this assistance, sagging heavily and barely conscious.

At length the tale of weary, dispirited men and women was told, and Tony came level with Colonel Matthieson, still maintaining himself stiffly upright, although with an effort which was painfully obvious. Not stopping for more than a cheery greeting, the second party passed on, and within another ten minutes were in the village, skirting

the quays of its tiny harbour. Down here, at the level of the lake, the air was appreciably cooler, and they stopped for a moment to bathe face and hands in the little stream which emptied itself into the harbour.

Following Rames' directions, they made for a quay where was moored an electric launch, big enough to take Colonel Matthieson's party as well as their own. The village itself bore a deserted appearance, but one or two natives were lounging against the harbour wall, and Kamram was detailed to interrogate them.

Oh yes, a priest had passed that way, carrying a woman, and the two went off in a small electric launch belonging to the Queen. Had they not tried to interfere? The natives shrugged their shoulders indifferently; what business was it of theirs to meddle with a priest of Set? They valued their lives, and no doubt the Queen would take any action that might be necessary.

Kamram was about to turn away when one of the men volunteered a further piece of information: A few minutes after Kishen Aiyangar's departure, another priest, as tall as the first one was short, had come down from Kala-Nawar; he had taken the only other small craft available—a rowing-boat—and immediately set out after the launch. In which direction had they gone? The man shrugged, and pointed vaguely towards the south-west—there *was* only one direction, as far as he knew.

This was an unexpected complication, and they were still discussing what it might mean when Colonel Matthieson arrived, closely followed by several of the more wiry amongst the late prisoners. He, too, could throw no light on the matter; in fact, nobody had the faintest idea of what had happened to Yvonne after she was taken from them a week before.

There was nothing for it but to wait for the others with as much patience as they could muster, and meanwhile Bob tumbled into the launch to investigate its working. He found no difficulty in mastering this and, long before the rear of the procession came staggering along the quay, he was sitting bolt upright at the helm, staring unseeingly

straight before him, his mind a turmoil of wild speculations and dreadful forebodings.

At last came a welcome "All aboard!" from Tony; instantly the engineer displaced the man as Bob's hand closed on a lever, and the launch glided out over the still, misty waters of the lake. They dared not use lights, for the tables might have been turned, up in the fort, and their boat would have presented an easy target from the vantage-point of the great gallery—a risk there was no sense in running.

At all times dark and mysterious, save when the sun was overhead, Lake Nawar was terrifying in its deathly stillness on this night of nights. Pulses which, but a short while before, had bounded with excitement at the prospect of escape, were stilled to a mere trembling flicker; blood which had coursed madly in the fierce joy of battle thinned and turned to water at the dread presence of the unknown, brooding darkly in these cavernous depths.

Forbidding cliffs towered majestically on every hand as the launch sped away from the narrow strip of habitable shore, which quickly vanished in the murky gloom, leaving nought but the lights of Kala-Nawar far overhead to act as beacons in this world of dreadful night.

Dark clouds curtained the heavens as with a funeral pall, and sinister foreboding—an awful fear of they knew not what—descended on the voyagers, who huddled closer together for mutual protection against an intangible something which brooded over the oily waters—a something devilish and obscene, a loathsome power of the underworld, burdened with all the sin which had been since the beginning of time.

The end was not yet ——.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE END OF NAWAR

THE directions given by Rames proved adequate and, within ten minutes of leaving Narsan, the look-out on the launch had sighted through the gloom a forbidding gap in the otherwise unbroken wall of rock which bordered Lake Nawar on the south. Steering straight into this, a few more minutes saw their craft moored to a stone landing-stage projecting from the western wall of the gap, just inside the entrance. Within the cleft, which was about a mile deep, pitchy blackness shrouded everything, and someone suggested that it would be advisable to wait for daylight, particularly in view of their exhausted condition. Bob and de St. Launeuc immediately announced that they two must go on in any case, but Tony promptly nipped argument in the bud by insisting that everyone should do so. He pointed out that, although the harbour had been empty when they left, no one knew whether there might not be other craft along the shores of the lake ; then, taking pity on the weaker spirits, he added the information that Afghan bearers would be waiting with food and drink up in the mountains, and that the sooner a start was made, the sooner would contact be established. There was a general access of cheerfulness at this, and for the first time Tony realised that, in the excitement of the flight, he had entirely omitted even to explain that they were following a carefully laid plan, let alone that arrangements had been made to secure their safe return to civilisation. It is to be feared, too, that the thought of leaving Myrtis behind for ever filled his mind to the exclusion of all other human feeling, rendering him intolerant of the more transient troubles of his friends.

Colonel Matthieson backed him up, and so, with much groaning and stretching of aching limbs—set stiff, even

after the short fifteen minutes occupied by the trip—the perspiring whites clambered out of the launch, followed by Tony's six Afghans, perspiring no less. Bob and de St. Launeuc had the satisfaction of knowing they were on the right track—if satisfaction it were—for a little farther along the landing-stage were moored a small electric launch and a rowing boat, one behind the other. The dark outlines of other boats could also be despaired dimly through the gloom, some lying alongside the quay and some anchored at a short distance from it; indeed, one rather gained the impression that the whole fleet of Nawar must be here,—in which case there would be trouble in the morning, if anyone were left to make trouble. It was impossible to see whether there were men on any of these craft, but if so, they were either too timid or too indifferent to shew themselves, so that the Colonel and Tony were able to make their dispositions on the landing-stage without molestation.

There was some reason now to hope that, since Kishen Aiyangar could not know of the bearers waiting at the rest-house, he would be observed before he could take advantage of such cover as might offer, or work harm to Yvonne. In any case, since it was practically certain that he had come this way with his captive, he must inevitably pass the rest-house, for Rames had been emphatic that there was only one route across the mountains. Besides, the bearers would be from Lar-Khan, and would certainly tackle a priest of Set, whether they knew he were up to mischief or not. Colonel Matthieson was sceptical, but Tony explained that these were no ordinary native coolies, since, for one thing, such were not to be found in Lar-Khan, and for another, Rames had given instructions that regular fighting men should accompany them, in view of the dangerous country which would afterwards have to be traversed. Neither he nor Tony had, of course, anticipated so easy a victory over Nawar that Tcherkev would be able to spare some of the troops sent there.

All the same, it was clearly desirable that no time should be lost in catching up with Kishen Aiyangar, for heaven

only knew what he might do between here and the rendezvous ; the pass itself was nearly fourteen miles distant—more than five of which, according to Rames, consisted of steps—whilst the rest-house was a mile beyond that. Accordingly, the party again spilt up into two sections, four of the Afghans being transferred to Colonel Matthieson as a precautionary measure.

The steps, which were barely visible in the darkness, despite their light colour, began at the inner edge of the landing-stage itself and crept up the side of the cleft ; fortunately for the weary travellers, they were not quite so steep as those leading down from Kala-Nawar to Narsan, since, although covering nearly twice the distance laterally, they only actually climbed an additional eight hundred feet. Nevertheless, such a task would have been appalling enough in daylight under the most favourable climatic conditions, whereas in this steamy darkness, reeling under the fearful heat, the tortures of the damned were surely no worse ; their legs were an inferno of burning agony, dragging at lumps of lead which strained and racked every nerve and sinew, whilst lungs were bursting from the sheer struggle to extract necessary oxygen from the clogged atmosphere.

Widening rapidly from its mouth, the cleft split into two forks, up the western face of the westernmost of which—i.e., the farthest from the pass—the steps led ; it was necessary, therefore, to follow right round the inner end of this fork and back along its eastern face to the bluff between the two, where the track dwindled to a mere ledge, little more than a yard wide. This perilous point once passed, and the ascent of the western face of the easternmost fork begun, the path again widened and the steps recommenced. A mountain torrent swept foaming over a two hundred foot wall at the extremity of the second fork, after traversing in a succession of cascades the gorge, up whose precipitous side those demon steps led. It seemed to Tony and his little band nothing less than a merciful dispensation of providence that the upper course of this stream was sufficiently high for the spray to reach them

throughout the last mile or so of their climb, and when at last the interminable steps gave way to a zig-zag track, rising in a moderate slope, the stream was actually alongside, so that one could bathe face and hands in its crystal waters.

"Phew!" exclaimed Tony, seating himself on a boulder to snatch a few moments' much-needed rest, and careless that a dozen rivulets streamed down his neck and beneath his collar; "that's just about saved my life! I say, Kamram, do you often get it hot like this here?"

"No can understand," replied the man; "never before know. Always cold nights."

"Storm coming, I guess," put in Jimmie, as a drop of rain fell on the back of his steaming hand; "we'd better get on."

The unwelcome advice was sound enough, and they started off again almost at once, staggering like drunken men for the first thirty yards or so. Here and there a drop of rain fell—more like a ball of water than a normal drop—but half-an-hour passed and still the unearthly silence endured, whilst already the coming of the dawn was heralded by faint signs of a jagged line straight in front of them, above which the blackness was a shade less intense than below it. Presently a faint breeze became perceptible, but, far from cooling their burning faces, it seemed merely to add to the heat of the furnace-like atmosphere.

For perhaps another half-hour they pressed wearily onwards under a sky scarcely less dark, but meanwhile the breeze had become a veritable blast of hot air, flaying their tortured flesh with its dragon-breath, whilst the occasional drops of rain which still fell seemed to scald, instead of cooling. The track now wound across an open plateau, apparently without shelter of any kind, and only its smooth white surface unrolling endlessly before them bore witness that man had ever set foot on these age-old hills.

Suddenly the solid ground itself gave a violent lurch, for all the world like the abrupt jerk of a motor which starts

unexpectedly, and every man-jack of them measured his length with a sickening jar. Simultaneously, the heavens burst with a reverberating crash, as a prolonged flash of lightning seared the skies, and the rending, tearing, fury of its thunder shattered the tangible silence.

After some hesitation, the prostrate men scrambled to their feet, uncertain still whether the slight earthquake which had flung them down was but the prelude to a worse shock, in which case it would have been wiser to remain on the ground. The earth gave no further sign, but the wind, which was still like a blast from hell itself, now shrieked and whistled all around them, threatening every moment to whirl them away like so many scraps of paper. Lightning played continuously, whilst clap after clap of thunder merged indistinguishably into one sustained inferno of noise, forcing them to thrust fingers into their ears to save the drums.

A few yards ahead lay a single enormous boulder, which looked as though it might afford some shelter from the full fury of the wind, so they made for it without delay, fighting desperately with the rushing air, and forced at last to go down on hands and knees and crawl. Once under its lee, they stood upright again, resigning themselves to inactivity until the storm should be spent, or at any rate, sufficiently abated to render further progress possible.

Less than three miles away to the north, they could see the towers of Kala-Nawar and, beyond it, Ba-Bel Rock, on which the Temple of Isis stood out clear and distinct in the dazzling glare of the lightning. Now they understood what had not been apparent before—why there was no direct path from the fort to the plateau on which they stood, which would have involved a climb of some eight hundred feet only, and saved an enormous détour: between them and Kala-Nawar was no level table-land, but a ravine into whose unfathomable depths not even the incessant lightning could penetrate, a ravine whose bottom must be well below the level of the lake, and whose sides scarcely offered foothold to a bird.

Tony pulled his binoculars out of his pocket, where they had lain ever since the wreck of the "Britain," and surveyed for the last time the land which contained all that he held dear upon earth. He could discern clearly enough a number of figures moving about on Ba-Bel Rock, but there was no sign of Myrtis, whom he knew he would have recognised, although her features might not be distinguishable.

Suddenly Jimmie interrupted with a bellowing roar, which reached his companions as a gentle whisper : "Look ! —Look at the fort ! What's wrong down there ? "

Reluctantly Tony withdrew his gaze from Ba-Bel and turned the glasses on Kala-Nawar. Red light glowed through rolling smoke in the central courtyard, dully insignificant under the white blaze of the never-ceasing lightning, whilst running figures could be seen racing towards the outer walls and fighting desperately in a mad mêlée round the narrow exit at the top of the steps. From the north-east corner of the fort burst the sudden glare of an explosion, the roar of which, if it ever reached them, mingled indistinguishably with the celestial artillery.

When the resulting smoke had cleared somewhat, the north-east tower had disappeared, and with it a huge section of the building, whilst flames belched forth of such fierceness as for a moment to defy the lightning.

"Magazine gone up, I fancy," shouted Tony, with a hazy recollection of the plan which Tcherkev had sent to Ba-Bel.

He swept his binoculars aimlessly over the rest of the building ; then suddenly stiffened, and focused them on the south-west tower, upon the summit of which had just emerged two forms he thought he recognised—a man and a woman. They were struggling furiously, and so quick were their movements that it was some seconds before he could be sure ; at last they steadied and remained for an instant locked together, neither able to secure an advantage over the other.

"The Queen and Tcherkev on top of that tower," he bawled, generously handing over the glasses ; "our thrice-blessed deliverer seems to have caught a Tartar."

Backwards and forwards swayed the combatants, storm and the burning fort forgotten—the one clutching desperately at a prize which still eluded him, the other striving to free herself in a frenzy of disgust and hatred. At last Paul Tcherkev flung loose and, dropping to his knees, extended clasped hands towards Phorenis, evidently in pleading. For some seconds Phorenis stood, firm as a rock in spite of the howling gale—listening to what he had to say, perhaps; then suddenly and swiftly she bent down, caught the kneeling man under the arm-pits and, sweeping him towards the parapet, attempted to cast him over. Tcherkev clawed frantically at her body, his clutching hands ripping a great rent in her already torn and tattered robe, but slowly and surely, inch by inch, that Queen amongst queens levered him up until he was balanced on the parapet. Mad with fear, Paul Tcherkev succeeded at the crucial moment in loosening the grip of one of her hands, and the abrupt cessation of resistance destroyed her doubtful equilibrium. Making a sudden movement to save herself, she involuntarily seized hold of the insecurely poised Russian, who toppled backwards, carrying with him the woman for whose sake he had brought to destruction the work of over two thousand years. So they disappeared from the ken of the watchers, for the massive tower screened that dreadful fall of nine thousand feet to the lake below, taking pity on the last moments of Phorenis the Magnificent, doomed to die in the arms of a puny beast of the Russias.

Meanwhile the storm, far from abating, had intensified its fury, and the screaming of the wind at times drowned even the thunder. Still the lightning blazed without intermission, playing fantastically round jagged peaks, limning titanic ranges in a fringe of fire and illuminating bottomless ravines, into whose depths the sun himself scarce ever shone.

The raging flames in Kala-Nawar were steadily devouring their way along the eastern block towards where, according to Tcherkev's plan, was situated another magazine. Hardly had Tony remembered this and bawled the informa-

tion to his companions, than a great belt of fire burst from the south-east corner and, when the smoke dispersed, the massive ramparts of countless centuries had vanished as a picture wiped from a slate.

Still the whole western side of the fort remained intact, daring the heavens to do their worst and, as it seemed, defying even the consuming fire within. Then, without the slightest warning, the whole earth heaved and swayed like a ship surmounting some gigantic wave. Whilst yet the storm-fiends yelled their hardest, a great chasm opened across the courtyard, belching forth fire and smoke in volcanic fury, and the last vestiges of Kala-Nawar toppled over into the lake, which rose to engulf them.

A valley of flame came into being as the chasm extended northwards to Ba-Bel Rock, which rent in twain, casting the Temple of Isis and all its human freight into the raging inferno below. As it fell, there came a fresh shock, and the whole landscape changed before their very eyes. Jagged cracks, each one a seething mass of white-hot lava, rent the domain of Nawar in all directions ; the waters of the lake rose up and up until, within less than thirty seconds from the commencement of the earthquake, smiling fields, luscious pasture-lands and barren rocks, together with the worshippers of Isis and Set alike, were engulfed in one gargantuan cauldron of boiling water, its surface sundered by explosion after explosion as lake met subterranean fires in hellish embrace, whilst titanic columns of steam shot miles into the reeling air.

The watchers on the plateau had flung themselves full-length at the first of the two shocks which had destroyed Nawar, but although they were still able to see the whole of the awful catastrophe from that position, each was thinking more of his dear ones than of nature's terrifying spectacle. Bob and the Frenchman, looking into one another's eyes, read there blank despair and the unspoken query, "Where is Yvonne in all this ?" Jimmie Matthieson thought of his father and mother, with whom he had so recently been re-united ; how did it fare with them ? Were they still on those precipitous steps when

the shocks came? If so, it seemed hardly possible that any could survive, even if the cliff itself had not gone crashing down into the depths.

Tony, to whom, freed at last from his bonds, had been born the mad idea of returning to Ba-Bel Rock when the pass was reached, instead of going on to civilisation with the others, saw his dream of happiness ruthlessly shattered by dread reality, saw before his very eyes the sacred place which sheltered Myrtis, his beloved, hurtling headlong into a fiery abyss, knew that no more on this earth would he look into her eyes and hold her dear form in his arms. It had been hell to leave her, alive and well midst the surroundings of her childhood, himself returning to bondage; but to know that the one he loved more than life itself had suffered that ghastly death—to lie there, helplessly watching, whilst her fair body was consumed in that pit of flame—! Careless of torn skin and bleeding flesh, he dug his fingers into the scanty earth in sheer agony of mind and soul, clenching his jaws like a vice to prevent himself screaming—the scream of a madman.

The elements themselves were in tune with his mood—the devastating lightning, whose forks and chains blistered the eyes—the reverberating thunder, whose unceasing roar seemed ever on the point of disintegrating the very mountains themselves—the raving wind, bearing on its leathern wings a trillion trillion fiends out of hell, shrieking and yelling in mad paroxysms of insensate fury;—earth and sky united in one unholy devil's dance on the brink of cataclysm, hurling reason from her seat, and impelling puny mortals with almost irresistible force to join the maniac revels.

Then at last came rain, sweeping earthwards in blinding sheets, which rebounded from the stony soil and living rock in fountains of spray, only to be beaten down again by that mighty deluge of rushing water. The very mountains throbbed to the drumming of it, and minute-old rivers threatened to sweep the six sodden atoms of humanity into the depths which still yawned between the plateau and what had been the domain of Nawar.

For fully half-an-hour the rain lasted ; then ceased as suddenly as it had begun, whilst to the shrieking fury of that raving wind succeeded a celestial zephyr, which soothed the bruised and battered earth with the gentle caress of its sylph-like wings.

Over the western ranges lightning still flickered in dying farewell, whilst from far away in the distance came yet the sound of the thunder's muttering, as of guns across the sea.

To the east, a band of tranquil blue widened and merged into the serene glory of a morning sky, creeping up behind the black mass of Gul-Koh, whilst peak after peak flashed out in raiment of dazzling gold as the sun shone forth in all his majestic grandeur, dispersing the storm-clouds with a touch of his many wands, and driving the fiends of darkness into ignominious flight.

Slowly and painfully, gingerly stretching each cramped and sodden limb, the only witnesses of the end of Nawar dragged themselves up and stood shivering, despite the genial warmth of the sun. Were any left of Colonel Matthieson's party, and did they need assistance ? Had Yvonne survived ? If so she must be in sore straits, apart from anything Kishen Aiyangar might do. These matters called for immediate consideration, but Tony, who, now that Myrtis was dead, found relief for his aching heart in thinking and planning, curtly pointed out that sick men would be of no use to anybody. In spite of protests from the other three whites, he claimed his rights as commander, insisting that first they must dry themselves and their clothes. The Scot was mutinous, but obeyed the order to strip, nevertheless, wringing out his sodden things and spreading them over the boulders, which were already drying in the sun.

The morning was warm and delightful, the sticky, unhealthy heat of the previous twenty-four hours having entirely disappeared, so that, within a very short time—spent in running about as fast as their tired legs would carry them—they were able once more to resume their clothes and get down to action.

After a brief colloquy, it was decided to split up the force, Tony going forward with Bob and de St. Launeuc in search of Yvonne, whilst Jimmie returned with the Afghans along the way they had come. Arrangements were made to meet again at the rest-house, from which help could be sent to Colonel Matthieson if necessary, so, after a brief handshake, they separated, each party going about its allotted task heavy of heart and with but little hope of a happy outcome.

## CHAPTER XXI

### SUTU

"**I**f my calculations are correct, it should be about another six miles to the rest-house," said Tony, presently; "that is, provided the jolly old hut survived the earthquake. If not, it might as well be six hundred."

"I hadna' thocht o' that," muttered Bob; "we'd starve then, an' a'"

"*Bien sûr,*" said de St. Launeuc, grimly, and relapsed into silence, a bad example which the others followed.

However, the road being intact seemed to suggest that the plateau had not been disturbed to any extent, and there was consequently some reason to hope that pass and rest-house might also not have experienced the full force of the upheaval. In fact, de St. Launeuc, who knew something of these matters, had earlier on expressed the opinion that the catastrophe was due rather to volcanic action than to the actual earthquake, which was comparatively slight. Incidentally, this view was supported by Rames' account of the chasm which had existed in the tunnel when first the priests of Isis and Set came to Nawar.

Immediately north of the track the ground was rising now, and with one accord the three stopped to take a last look at the scene of the cataclysm ere it was hidden from their sight for ever, although nothing really showed of what had been. Lake Nawar still existed—rather larger, and slightly different in shape—but that was all. Of the triangular shelf of cultivated land, with all its burden of life and work, not a vestige was left, and on the east the cliffs dropped sheer into the lake, just as had always been the case on the other three sides. Columns of steam still wreathed upwards from the surface, but otherwise the whole valley—or, rather, cavity—betrayed no signs of anything abnormal. Undoubtedly, the

level of the water was much higher, but the domain of Nawar must also have subsided, or at least the great platform on which the fort had stood would have been visible. That there was no trace of Ba-Bel Rock was only to be expected, since it had collapsed before their very eyes like a house of cards.

The renewed thought of Ba-Bel Rock and all it meant to him was too much for Tony, who, with a muttered excuse, left the others and strode a little further along to where the rising ground developed into a ridge, hiding the valley from view—a grim, immovable barrier between him and his memories.

Bob and de St. Launeuc followed almost immediately, and once more the trio marched steadily and silently onwards, their eyes keenly watching on all sides for the flutter of a yellow robe, or any other sign which would betray the presence of the Hindu priest or his victim. One thing that troubled Bob was to reconcile what he had seen of Kishen Aiyangar with the apparent fact that the man had carried Yvonne all this way, to say nothing of climbing those awful steps. Possibly this explained the second priest, who, from all accounts, must have been pretty powerful ; the more Bob thought about it, the more he became convinced that the tall man had merely followed in order to relieve the other of his burden. But then, why had they not left Kala-Nawar together ? The Scot shrugged his shoulders impatiently ; what on earth was the use of wondering ? He would know soon enough, God help him—and Yvonne !

The trio had covered more than a third of the distance when Tony's keen eyes detected movement along the track far in front. As a measure of precaution, he loosened his revolver in its holster, an example which the others imitated ; the wet cartridges had already been ejected, of course, and replaced by fresh ones from the oilskin pouches in which, fortunately, they had been carried. It was soon evident, however, that there was no need for warlike preparations ; for one thing, there was no sign of the dreaded, but eagerly sought-after yellow, and for

another, the movement came from considerably more than three people, which was the biggest number that could be associated with Yvonne's captor.

Suddenly Tony gave an exclamation of surprise. "That's old Zeman in front, for a dollar ! Thank God, then, the rest-house escaped ! "

"An' wha the de'il is Zeman ? " enquired Bob.

"Oh, I forgot you didn't know him," explained Tony ; "he is, or was, the headman of Lar-Khan. Poor devil ! He's lost everything, home and all, just the same as those fellows we brought with us. I didn't know *he* intended to be at the rest-house, though."

Within a very short time the burly native was standing before Tony, beaming with delight to find him safe and sound, whilst the bearers, some of whom had been brought along in the expectation that food and assistance would be needed, appeared no less pleased."

Questioned as to Yvonne and the two priests, Zeman shook his head and stated emphatically that no one had passed the rest-house. Bob attempted to interrogate the native further, but dry sobs choked his utterance as he realised to the full what this news meant—the last human hope dashed. Where the girl was, only her Maker knew ! Mechanically, he and de St. Launeuc partook of the food which was offered them, whilst Tony discussed with Zeman what was best to be done. Clearly, Colonel Matthieson's party had first call, even if only because of its size, and they therefore decided that Zeman and his men should go on to meet it, but the head man promised to detail one or two of the soldiers to search amongst the boulders on either side of the track as he proceeded. A discreet question eliciting that the Afghans knew nothing of what had happened in the valley, Tony thought it kindest to take the head man aside and break the news there and then, rather than allow the results of the catastrophe to burst on his vision without warning.

Zeman stood silent whilst Tony told him the truth as gently as possible. The lines on the native's merry face became drawn, and there was a look of dumb misery

in his eyes, but that was all when the Englishman had finished, he just said, "It is the will of Isis," remaining for a moment with bowed head ere returning to his men.

"There goes a man," thought Tony, gazing after the Afghan, and somehow feeling ashamed of the rein he had been giving to his own anguish, for had not Zeman lost a wife and three jolly little children, whilst *he* had only to mourn a young girl whom he had known for less than a fortnight? Then what about Bob? What about de St. Launeuc? Good Heavens! Was *his* the only loss in the world? "Anthony, my lad," he muttered, under his breath, "you're a white-livered skunk—damned if you aren't!" He was unjust to himself, for, truth to tell, Bob's state of mind was much the same, and who shall condemn them? Were they not both in love for the first time, and is it not human nature to expect the sun to cease shining and the world to stand still when Fate intervenes with her cynical reminders of our utter impotence?

Zeman told off a couple of soldiers to escort the whites back to the rest-house, and Tony used them for scouting amongst the boulders away on the right, where the country was still open. As for the north, the track was now shut in on that side by a sheer wall of rock, which scarcely afforded cover for a bird, let alone for two priests and a woman.

The search was fruitless, and when, about a mile from the pass, the ground to the southward suddenly fell away into a ravine and the track became no more than a wide zig-zag shelf cut in its precipitous side, there was nothing for it but to recall the Afghans, who then marched silently along behind the three equally silent white men. They were rapidly approaching Gul-Koh, whose great peak towered awe-inspiringly skywards, completely overshadowing the numberless smaller peaks and jagged ridges which now surrounded them on all hands. The path, rising gradually all the time, led round the end of the ravine and doubled back on itself in order to follow the opposite face.

At length they reached the pass, fourteen thousand feet above sea-level, and as the track swept round between towering cliffs, they saw straight ahead all that was left

of the wreck of the "Britain." Most of it was still clinging to the lower slopes of the ridge where it had come to grief, but last night's storm had swept all débris from the knife-edge which, according to Rames, had cut the foremost car in two. At the foot of the ridge, some six hundred yards from the road, lay one of the cars, half hidden by boulders and apparently but little damaged.

Tony hardly spared a glance for these pitiful remains of the great craft he had once been so proud to command ; they brought home to him too strongly the potentiality of that little word, "if." *If* only Sir James hadn't — ; but what was the use of "*if-ing*" ?

Bob, more curious, and perhaps impelled by some subtle influence of which he himself was scarcely conscious, left the track and began to pick his way carefully amongst the boulder-strewn and fissured ground which separated it from the airship's car. The next instant, his stentorian bellow awoke the echoes :

"Th' yellow prriet ! "

Without waiting for support, Bob Maconochie drew his revolver and made for the ridge like a madman, leaping from stone to stone with sure-footed agility, and dashing down declivities and up treacherous slopes at break-neck speed.

The others followed more cautiously, spreading out to right and left in order to scotch any attempt at escape. Whilst they were negotiating a hollow, and Bob, already two-thirds of the way over, was momentarily hidden from view, a second cry reached their ears. Yvonne's voice ! A trifle shrill, with more than a hint of hysteria in it, but unmistakably Yvonne's, and her words were "Bob ! Bob ! "

"*Attendez, Messieurs !*" cried de St. Launeuc, excitedly waving Tony and the Afghans back as they would have hurried on ; then, the shock of relief too much for him, he seemed to crack up all at once, collapsing on to his knees and burying his face in his hands, sobbing repeatedly the while, "*Dieu merci — dieu merci — ah, le bon dieu. . . .*"

After a few moments he became calmer and clambered up the slope, motioning the others to follow.

Arrived at the top, they saw what they expected to see—Yvonne in Bob's arms, sobbing her heart out on his shoulder. De St. Launeuc hesitated again, partly out of a self-denial which shewed how high the Scot stood in his estimation; and partly because he was still not sure of himself.

Seeing how things were, Tony gave him a gentle push forward and, with a brusque, "Heavens, man! Get along! You're her father, aren't you?" deliberately faced about and sat down, legs dangling over the hollow from which they had just emerged. Somewhat bewildered, the Afghans copied him, and so the three remained until Bob gave them a hail.

Tony groaned in spirit as he beheld the radiant happiness on the faces of his three friends, contrasting it with his own misery, but he was genuinely delighted to see Yvonne alive and well, so no lack of warmth marred his greeting.

"Where's the 'yellow priest,' Stewpan?" he asked, feeling that there had been enough sentiment for the time being.

To his astonishment, Yvonne's face clouded over, and she pointed silently to a gap in the side of the car, where could be seen the yellow robe which had attracted the Scot's attention.

"That is my only regret," she said, ". . . the death of a gallant gentleman." She smiled sadly as she noticed the dawning amazement on their faces, an expression which, however, rapidly gave way to something like consternation. "Oh, I don't mean Kishen Aiyangar," she went on, hurriedly; "I am speaking of Sutu."

"And who the mischief is Sutu?" asked her father, somewhat irritably; "Kishen Aiyangar I know, but Sutu. . . ."

"Were it not for him, I should not be here with you now," replied Yvonne; "come inside, and I will explain."

She led the way into the car, which they could now see was really only a fragment. The part remaining intact was the airship's store-room, and packing cases were strewn in all directions, some with their contents scattered

over the floor. The body of Sutu lay just inside the gap, whilst further in, half-supported against the wall of the car, was that of Kishen Aiyangar, tongue lolling out and wide-open eyes almost starting out of the head, a look of terror in them which it was not good to behold. Leaving the Afghans outside, the three white men disposed themselves on packing cases and waited to hear what good Yvonne could possibly have to say of a priest of Set.

It will be remembered that, in order to carry her off from the Temple, Kishen Aiyangar had first stunned her with a blow from behind, and so shrewd had been the stroke that it was not until the electric launch in which he escaped from Narsan was well on its way to the cleft that she recovered. The girl could give no very clear account of her subsequent journey, however ; she was naturally terror-stricken at finding herself alone on Lake Nawar with her persecutor, and distinctly remembered screaming and trying to throw herself overboard.

After that, it would seem that the priest must have hypnotised her, for she could tell of no further attempt at escape, and, indeed, had a hazy recollection of walking up innumerable steps of her own volition.

"Oh, so that's how he got you up," commented Tony ; "we never thought of it. In fact, Bob rather suspected your friend, Sutu, of acting as light porter." He was intentionally facetious, for, in Yvonne's highly nervous state, the relation of her experiences, whilst relieving the mind, was draining her body of what little strength remained to it.

His absurd remark had the desired effect, and she continued more calmly. Where the Hindu intended to take her eventually, she did not know, but it was pretty obvious that he was making first for the rest-house. They were overtaken by the storm less than ten minutes' walk from the pass, and Kishen Aiyangar hurried her along at such a pace that his influence waned, with the result that she fully recovered her senses just as he was helping her into the "Britain's" car.

Whether the storm or the earthquake had terrified him,

she could not say, but he entirely failed in several attempts to reimpose his will. As far as she could guess, they had been in the car for about twenty minutes when suddenly, without the slightest warning, Kishen Aiyangar abandoned his scientific methods and resorted to brute force. Yvonne was strong, and terror gave power to her muscles, but she could not hope to hold her own for any length of time against the priest, who, though undersized, was wiry enough. She had not forgotten the little gold cross which had at least held him back on the previous occasion, but to get to it meant loosening her grip on his wrists, a move which would have spelt immediate disaster.

An eager question as to that "previous occasion" came from three pairs of lips simultaneously, but the girl waved it aside with an impatient gesture which was very unlike her. "I will tell you about that some other time," she said.

In the absence of outside interference, there could have been only one ending to such a struggle, and the Hindu would inevitably have worked his will before help arrived, but for a chance circumstance—if, indeed, it were chance. Exerting all his force, he had borne her to the ground and was dragging her this way and that in the endeavour to free his hands, when the shoulder of her dress caught on a jagged piece of wood projecting from one of the broken packing cases, which ripped it open, exposing the cross at her throat to the full blaze of the lightning. Once more the holy symbol had the effect of frightening Kishen Aiyangar, without turning him from his purpose, but this was enough to make all the difference. His involuntary recoil left him poised insecurely in a crouching position, supported only by the girl's grip on his wrists, at the identical moment when the second earthquake shock occurred.

The car, which had been lying at an angle, was jerked into its normal upright position, hurling them across the floor with such force that, their heads coming into contact with the side, they were both stunned. The girl could not say how long she remained unconscious, but it was

probably not more than a few minutes, since her senses returned just as the final shock came.

Kishen Aiyangar also recovered ere she could make any attempt to escape—for she would have braved storm and earthquake a thousand times rather than remain there with that fiend—and once more the unequal contest was renewed. The delay had proved her salvation, however, for scarcely had they come to grips again than Yvonne felt herself pushed violently aside and Sutu stood between them, water streaming from every fold of his yellow robe, his laboured breathing telling how heavily even his great strength had been taxed by the fight against the wind.

Kishen Aiyangar had spoken hardly a word since making his first attack, but, on seeing the Eunuch-Priest, such a rushing torrent of Greek poured from his lips that Yvonne could only catch a few words here and there. She realised, however, that Sutu, her deliverer for the second time, was being laid under a curse so appalling, so inconceivably terrible, that she refused to repeat even that little she *had* understood. Sutu was visibly affected, shaking uncontrollably with fear, despite his physical strength, and the girl felt that all would yet be lost unless she could do something to counteract the mental effect of the Hindu's words—ay, and their physical effect, too, for already Sutu's face was greying with the unmistakable approach of death.

This might have been due to auto-suggestion, although Yvonne, whilst admitting the possibility, thought otherwise. However that may be, it suddenly occurred to her that Sutu might have noticed Kishen Aiyangar's fear of the cross that night in Kala-Nawar, and she resolved to risk her most precious possession in the hope of its helping to restore the man's nerve. It was touch and go, and had the idea entered her mind but a few seconds later, it would have been too late, for, whatever the cause, Sutu was unquestionably dying.

Yvonne had only a hazy recollection of what actually happened and, indeed, she confessed that she herself must have been on the brink of madness. She remembered snatching the cross from her neck and thrusting it into

Sutu's hand, which was shaking violently and was cold with a dreadful cold. Instantly, as it seemed to her, his whole body stiffened, warmth flooding his hand before hers left it ; the next moment, he had flung himself at the Hindu's throat and they went to the ground with a crash.

Within thirty seconds Kishen Aiyangar was dead, strangled by that fearful grip—one could see the mark of the cross on his throat where Sutu had rammed it deep into the flesh—but ére the terrified girl could find words, her deliverer had risen and was staggering towards the gap in the side of the car, where he, too, fell dead.

What had killed him ? The Hindu's curse ? Yvonne could not say ; she only knew that he was the bravest man she had ever met, who, in gratitude for a kind word, had defied in the person of Kishen Aiyangar what to him was the all-powerful being—Set, the only god he knew. Deaf-mute, Eunuch, heathen—savage, if you will—but surely no more gallant gentleman ever lived !

The three white men could but agree with her verdict, and they readily acceded to her request that Sutu should immediately be given decent burial. A little way from the airship's car was a small hollow, in which they laid him ; but first, at Yvonne's urgent insistence, they stripped off the yellow robe of Set and wrapped the body in some cloth from a burst package lying in the store-room. Picking up her cross from where it had fallen when Sutu died, she herself fastened it reverently round his neck, and afterwards, in default of the burial service—which none of them could remember—her father improvised a prayer over the grave, commanding the soul of this erstwhile priest of Set to God's mercy, and to His protection from that spirit of evil which had overcome the flesh.

Then, having filled in the hollow with stones and such earth as was available, they raised a small cairn over the spot and sadly resumed their way to the rest-house, which was reached without further incident.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE BROKEN BRIDGE

**I**T was nearly dusk before Zeman and his bearers returned, bringing the bulk of Colonel Matthieson's party, a procession of haggard men and women, whose eyes held a haunted look that would last for many a long day.

They had been caught by the initial earthquake shock not far from the top of the steps, which at that point were much shallower than farther back. Everybody was flung down, just as had happened to those on the plateau, but fortunately the direction of the impulse had been such that their fall was inwards, i.e., towards the face of the cliff ; had it been otherwise, not one could possibly have escaped being hurled into the ravine. As it was, a life was lost, Sir James having gone to join his wife, in whose death he had, until the last, persistently refused to believe. Nobody quite knew how it happened, for he was bringing up the rear, but they thought he must have made a violent effort to retain his feet, so overbalancing backwards into the ravine.

Had they remained on the steps, there would probably have been no further losses, but unluckily—though naturally enough—the more experienced were of the opinion that the place would be too dangerous in the event of further shocks, so the order was given to go on to the summit. Here it was that a disaster occurred, which cost the lives of three more out of the remaining seventeen and seriously injured other three. About half the party had reached level ground, and the rest were staggering slowly up the final slope, when the wind, sweeping unimpeded with devastating fury across that exposed spot, suddenly increased to such an appalling extent that nothing could withstand it. All who had reached the summit went down like ninepins, three of them being

flung against the rocks with such force that they sustained broken limbs, whilst a lady just below the top, together with the two men supporting her, were whirled away like feathers over the heads of those behind, who were fortunately some distance down.

Caught thus between wind and earthquake, it was hardly surprising that poor Colonel Matthieson did not know what to do for the best, but he wisely chose the lesser of two evils and ordered those below to stay where they were, whilst he and the others already on top crawled back down the slope, dragging the injured men with them and descending far enough to secure shelter. There they remained until the storm was past, lying full length, and hanging on to such irregularities in the face of the cliff as they could find. The subsequent earthquake shocks, whilst violent enough, did not dislodge anyone's hold, and the slope whereon they lay remained intact, although a whole section of the mountain side broke away further down.

Jimmie and the Afghans reached them before their march was resumed, and so were in time to help with the injured, but had Zeman not urged his men forward at top speed, there can be but little doubt that others of the party would have died from exhaustion. As it was, they were now in no condition to continue the journey to civilisation for the present, so a halt of several days at the rest-house—where they made themselves as comfortable as circumstances permitted—was unavoidable.

The men of Lar-Khan employed their time in improvising litters for the injured, drawing for this purpose on the plentiful supply of wood and other material always kept in the rest-house. Meanwhile, Dr. Marsh set broken limbs and patched up abrasions as well as he could without proper appliances, being assisted in this work by one of the Afghans, who evinced an extraordinary knowledge of herbs and the like, of which also the cache boasted a considerable stock. Zeman explained that accidents were

very common on the thirty-five mile trek from the southern shore of Lake Nawar to the main Kabul-Kandahar route, and that the priests of Set, whilst caring nothing for human life as such, could not afford to lose men for the sake of a little attention.

An early-morning start was made on the fourth day after the destruction of Nawar, Zeman acting as guide and walking beside Tony, who was now in command. In reality, the former's services were hardly needed, since it was impossible to mistake the track—a wide ledge which descended in huge zig-zags along a precipitous gorge between two mountain ranges converging on Gul-Koh from the south. About two miles beyond the rest-house, a mountain torrent appeared from somewhere up on the slopes of the easternmost ridge, tumbling in a succession of cascades far down to the bottom of the gorge on their left, where it foamed along beside them the whole day.

The entire distance to the next rest-house, situated in a cavern about a mile away from the main Kabul-Kandahar route, was only just over twenty miles, but it was not thought advisable, in view of the still weak condition of some of the party, to try and cover the whole of it in one march. Accordingly a halt was made about eleven o'clock at a point where the track turned east for a short distance to negotiate a spur, which sheltered it from the direct rays of the sun at that hour.

Their march was resumed at a little after four, in order that the spot where it had been decided to camp for the night might be reached before dusk. Zeman had suggested the place in question, which was a huge pocket in the hills, its bottom being almost like an arena, some twenty yards in diameter and more or less level. The northern side of this natural amphitheatre was about a thousand feet high, but its slope was fairly gentle, and the track, which led straight to the brink, there terminated in a flight of steps a mile long.

In the ridge forming the eastern wall of the amphitheatre, separating it from the gorge, was a wide gap; this led to a wooden bridge, carrying the track at a dizzy

height over the river, after which it followed along the far side of the ravine, at that point only some thirty yards wide.

Their camping-place was reached without incident, and the Afghans set about making rough shelters for the ladies and the injured, whilst Tony wandered off to see what sort of Blondin-performance might be in store for the morrow. Returning almost immediately with a grave face, he took Zeman aside and informed him that the bridge was gone ! The native grimaced, and followed through the gap to where broken ropes and a few fragments of wood were all that was left to show where it had been ; after contemplating these dismal relics in silence for some moments, he said, tersely, " Must build new bridge."

" Obviously," returned Tony, with some irritation, " but how ? "

" Him no difficult. Take time," responded Zeman, in no wise put out by the other's tone. " Trees in there. . . ." —pointing towards the amphitheatre ; ". . . must go back rest-house ; fetch ropes, tools. I take my men. You all stop here. Back to-morrow. Then build bridge, one day, two days — no can tell."

" Well, it's got to be done, of course," agreed Tony ; " we're lucky to have the material. But what about food ? We spent three extra days up at the rest-house, and this job will increase the delay to a week, at least."

" Sahib no worry," replied Zeman ; " plenty food. Not so many sahibs ; some killed, some not come."

This was true enough, for Tony, not knowing how many of the airship's survivors were killed when she struck, had asked Rames to provide for more than twice the number of whites now present. Relieved of all anxiety on this score, there was nothing for it but to settle down in the amphitheatre with what patience they could muster, until a new bridge had been constructed. Truth to tell, he would have cared very little for himself had the rest-house not been so well provided against such a contingency, since for him all the zest had departed from life, and it was all one whether he left his bones in this desolate spot

or in another—now, or forty years hence. Indeed, now would be preferable, for so he would the earlier rejoin Myrtis in the Great Beyond. What had he to do with this world, who henceforth must live out his days alone, paradise but a fortnight's memory? Gazing contemplatively down into the ravine, he wondered whether it would not be best to end his nagging misery so; a single "false step," and he would be with Myrtis. But would he? Would she not turn from him with hatred and scorn, knowing what he had done? Well, it might be so or it might not; that was the coward's way, anyhow, and he would have none of it. Then, putting the temptation sternly from him, he turned and walked back into the amphitheatre, whither Zeman had already repaired.

The others took the breaking of the bridge philosophically enough and, indeed, they were only too glad of the chance to rest for a few more days, particularly those amongst them who were not inured to hardship. As for Bob, he would not have cared had the delay been a matter of months, instead of days, whilst Alan Merton was doubtless of the same mind.

Tony's heart throbbed with renewed bitterness as he caught sight of his two friends wandering off into the woods which clothed the western and northern slopes of the amphitheatre, each with the maid of his choice, and utterly oblivious to the less happy fate of their commander. Were there regrets and longings in the Beyond, he wondered; Myrtis knew now that the sacrifice need never have been made, and that he had really been free all along; did *she* curse that little word, "if," which contains within its two letters the sum of so much misery and tears, the hell of so many lives?

He wondered what she would have him do with his life—or rather, existence, for he could not think of it as life without her. To what better cause could he devote it than to take up the work which Rames, her guardian, had laid down? Undoubtedly that was what she would say to him. Set's earthly home was destroyed, but the evil influence of the devil's henchmen lived on in every

land, in every clime, and he, Anthony Netherley, knew their methods, their plans and their secrets—for had not Rames instructed him in many things through the lips of his beloved? Then surely that were the least he could do to repay, to prove himself worthy of the great love which Myrtis had bestowed upon him. He would throw himself, heart and soul, into the task of destroying the leaves and branches of that tree of evil—the trunk, if not the root of which, had been consumed by fires from the underworld, from the kingdom of Osiris, spouse of Isis.

Grimly determined, Tony knew that this was his destiny, in the pursuit of which he might perhaps earn some ease from the intolerable ache at his heart, some peace in the knowledge that Myrtis, though invisible, would be near by to watch over him and approve, meeting him at the last with outstretched hands of welcome and a glad smile. . . .

As yet, though, the bitter-sweet memories of his earthly Myrtis were too near. Weak human nature cannot rise to such transcendent heights of passion for an idea, when she who has called it into being is but a little time departed, when lips seem still to feel the sweet pressure of hers, and the fragrance of her presence lingers yet. So Tony; despite his decision to devote every minute, every thought, and every ounce of energy to the work he knew Myrtis would have him do—nevertheless, he fell asleep that night with the melancholy words of those oft-quoted lines haunting his brain in endless repetition, like the tolling of some funeral bell: “. . . The saddest are these, ‘It might have been.’”

Leaving behind only a few men to wait on the whites, Zeman started off early the following morning for the rest-house, returning again shortly before dusk, laden with tools of various descriptions, ropes, and a supply of sawn planks. It was a tribute to the man’s intelligence and inherent ability that, although he had only seen the bridge four times in his life, and had certainly never built such a

thing, he seemed to know exactly how to set about the job. Colonel Matthieson, the only white man there who had even an elementary acquaintance with erections of that type, offered a word of advice now and then, when Zeman's lack of knowledge in regard to stresses and tensions might have led him astray; but with this exception, the bridge which finally replaced the one which had been broken—probably by the earthquake—was purely the product of the head man's ingenuity and resource.

Felling of the trees required began at dawn on the second morning of their stay in the amphitheatre, and Zeman showed that he appreciated the advantage of conserving energy, by selecting such as could be made to fall in a line with the gap, thus demanding the least manipulation.

When work was finally knocked off at dusk, the trees were down and considerable progress had been made—no ca' canny, here! Tony, disconsolate and alone, save for an Afghan sitting on a tree-stump some distance away, was wandering up and down in absent contemplation of the now starlit scene of the day's labours. Absorbed in his thoughts, and paying no attention to the obstructions which littered the ground, he inadvertently stepped on the edge of a plank. His ankle, still a trifle weak from the after-effects of its sprain, twisted painfully, and he pitched headlong to the earth, where he lay for a few seconds, half stunned by the fall.

Once the dizziness had passed, he rolled over and tried to rise, only to drop back again with a groan. At the same time, there was a sound of light footsteps, as the Afghan who had been seated on the tree-stump came running up, and knelt down beside him with the words :

“ My Tony, what has happened? Are you hurt? ”

Was he mad or dreaming? It was the voice of Myrtis! Had he perchance been killed by his fall, and was this death? Myrtis was dead, but it was she who knelt beside him—brown of face and in the garb of a bearer, but unmistakably Myrtis!

Sitting up with an effort, he stretched out his hand gropingly and seized hers. It was warm! It was real!

"Myrtis, my darling ! Is it *really* you ?" he whispered, still half-convinced that he must be dead, and that their spirits had met in the Beyond.

"It is I, my Tony," she replied, but, although her hand lay unresistingly in his, she made no movement towards him, merely repeating her original query, "Are you hurt ?"

Assured at last that this was indeed Myrtis, warm and living, although changed in manner as in appearance, he waved the question aside with a brief, "It is nothing," and then burst into incoherent speech :

"But what does it all mean ? How do you come here, and in disguise ? What has happened ? And why—in heaven's name—*why* are you so strange ? Why do you look at me like that ?"

His bewilderment was not surprising, for the girl was gazing at him with an expression of infinite melancholy, and he could see great tears in her eyes, which glistened in the starlight. Still she made no sign, so he went on confusedly :

"Myrtis, dear heart, what is wrong ? Don't you know I have been through hell these last few days, thinking you were dead ? Why did you not reveal yourself before ? I had no idea, I . . . ."

Suddenly she leaned forward, put her free hand under his chin and, lifting his head, gazed into his eyes as if she would read his very soul. "My Tony, is that true ?" she whispered, her voice sounding strained and unnatural.

"True ? Is what true ? That I have been in hell ? By heaven, Myrtis, haven't you *seen* ? I love you ! I love you !" Tony's voice broke, and he put out his arms, but she drew back.

"Rosalind . . . ." she muttered, uncertainly.

"Rosalind !" he repeated, with bitter scorn ; "she is over there with another man. I am free !—*Free* ! When I knew, I meant to return to Ba-Bel, but then the earthquake came, and I thought you were dead."

"Then you *do* want me ? You *do* love me ? You were not . . . ."

"Want you! Love you!" he gasped, and, words failing him, he once more stretched out his arms in passionate appeal. This time she did not draw back, but surrendered herself to his embrace with a long sigh of infinite happiness, infinite peace, and infinite content.

After a while, she averted her head and, burying her face on his shoulder, confessed disjointedly the reason for her strange behaviour: "My Tony, up there—up at the rest-house, I thought—that is—I saw that your Rosalind was with another man—she did not look at you. I thought—my Tony, forgive me!—I thought you—had—lied!"

Myrtis was sobbing in bitter self-abasement, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that she uttered the last word at all. Tony tried to stay her confession, but she kept her head averted and persisted in finishing: "Then I was sorry I had humbled myself. When you said good-bye that dreadful night, my pride fought with my love—and my love won. I told nobody, not even Rames, what I would do—that I would be near you, be your servant—even I, Myrtis. I disguised myself like this and took the place of an Afghan from the Temple, who was to conduct the bearers through the tunnel, for even Zeman was never entrusted with the secrets of its many doors. Then, when you came, I was sorry for what I had done—perhaps, that was my punishment.—I thought—I dared to believe you capable of dishonour—Tony, forgive . . ."

This time he was adamant. It was not right that Myrtis should abase herself thus—she whose love for him was so great that merely to serve "were paradise enow." Gently, but insistently, brooking no denial, he drew her head from his shoulder and turned her face to his.

"Myrtis, my beloved . . ."

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